Yaatrā

journal of assamese literature & culture.



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A Note from the Publisher

On the advice of our well wishers it has been decided to bring out *Yaatra* as a quarterly journal. All our valued subscribers who have subscribed for different periods will have their subscriptions extended.

The Dream : The Project

It looked like an impossible dream at the outset. A translation journal of Assamese literature and culture in English! A project with an absolutely nil commercial potentials! But we thought a dream that is not tempered on the anvil of reality would always remain a wistful dream. And Assamese literature & culture would remain unknown to the outside world. So we decided to proceed.

The Belief :

We always believed that we have really something to present – to showcase from the world for Arts in Assam.

The Mission :

The Mission that was born out of this belief is –

To present before the nation and the world the treasure of contemporary Assamese literature in English Translation;

To popularise Assamese writing and writers in the National scene;

To build bridges of friendship and understanding between people, places, languages, cultures and generations

'This is a mission of light and beauty. Be a part of it.'

Chairman,
The North East Foundation

a century of assamese novel

A hundred years is not an insignificant period.

If we measure it with some historical yardstick, it is then that the significance of this time period will really dawn on our consciousness. Just imagine – the mighty USSR (United Soviet Socialistic Republic) existed for 70 years only!

The Assamese novel is a hundred-year old youth now.

And it is expected that it would start showing its youthful vigour, some reckless vitality and some real talent.

We believe it does.

But there are sceptics — the doubting Thomases and people who are not fully convinced that the Assamese novel has really come of age. These very people are not known to have done any detailed or in-depth study of the novel in Assamese. What they speak they speak from their preconceived notions. But their notion about novel is also suspect. Because you have to apply some scale – and what is their scale is not known.

Prof. Hiren Gohain has started the serious effort of evaluation of the Assamese novel with his path-breaking study and criticism of Birinchi Kumar Barua's novel ***Jeevanar Batot***. That is the beginning of a serious discourse on the Assamese novel in the state.

The novel in Assam is not without its moments of crowning glory. Two of our towering Assamese novelists – late Birendrakumar Bhattacharya and Dr. Indira (Mamoni Roisom) Goswami — are honoured with the prestigious Indian Jnanpeeth Award. A tradition of novel that can produce two such great novelists is not something one can ignore.

The Assamese novel has developed a distinct character of its own. The main vehicle for the Assamese novel is popular, literary and little magazines in Assamese, specially their special numbers brought out on the occasions of Durga Puja and Bihu (Assamese new year's day – Bohag Bihu). The constraint of space in these magazines has resulted in a type of the Assamese novel which is short and intense but is not a novelette or a novella in the sense it is generally understood. The Assamese short novels deserve serious attention and recognition of its own as serious and beautiful works of fiction belonging to the tradition of novel.

In this issue of ***Yaatra*** we have decided to focus on the Assamese novel. We have therefore chosen four very sensitive novelists and their novels. The novel by Navakanta Barua deals with some aspects of Buddhist philosophical tradition through the story of Patachara. Indira (Mamoni Roisom) Goswami's debut novel (not widely known outside Assam) deals with the life, environs of the migratory labour working on a construction site in the shadow of the Shivaliks. Homen Borgohain, another great novelist, explores the life environs of the untouchable underclass of Assam. Sheelabhadra, a very sensitive fiction writer explores the loneliness and the tragedy of human existence. These works, which shall be serialised in 2-3 issues only, would show the range, the depth, variety and also the artistic and literary attainment of the Assamese novel. Three articles on various aspects of the Assamese novel are also presented. This focus shall continue in next 2-3 issues and works of newer novelists shall also be included.

We hope our effort would give our readers a glimpse into the world of the Assamese novel.□

Dear Sir,

I acknowledge receipt of the inaugural issue of 'Yaatra' - the journal of Assamese literature and culture.

I wish to sincerely express my gratitude for the same, and offer my compliments and best wishes to you and your team of collaborators

With kind regards and good wishes.

Archbishop Pedro López Quintana
Apostolic Nuncio
Apostolic Nunciature in India

. . . .

Dear Prof. Borah

I would like to thank you most sincerely for having sent a copy of 'Yaatra' - the bi-monthly journal of Assamese literature and culture - to this Embassy.

The journal will definitely be an important tool to make better known the literary and cultural treasures of the North East region of India and in particular of Assam. Kindly accept my warmest congratulations for this achievement. I do hope 'Yaatra' will be able to reach the libraries of schools and colleges all over the country.

With my best regards,

Philippe Falisse
Counsellor (Press and Culture)
Embassy of Belgium
New Delhi.

Dear Prof. D.J. Borah,

I am extremely grateful to you for sending me a copy of the Journal, 'Yaatra' devoted to Assamese Literature and Culture.

I found 'Yaatra' very useful in learning about the various trends in contemporary Assamese literature. Translations are uniformly good and the production is of a very high standard. It has set an example for similar Journals to follow.

As a student of Indian Literatures, I found the Journal particularly useful and relevant. I am sure it will soon find a wide readership among general readers as well academics. You have done a great service to the cause of Indian Literature by publishing this Journal.

E.V. Ramakrishnan
Department of English
Veer Narmad South
Gujarat University
Surat

. . . .

Dear Sir,

Excellent with wonderful information and literary content. All the best. Thanks.

Dr. Pothukuchi Sambasiva Rao
Kawadiguda,
Secunderabad

Dear Dr. Borah

I received today 'Yaatra' a journal of Assamese Literature and Culture and find the Magazine is nicely published, Printed and edited by you.

You are perfectly communicating the Assamese Literature for which you should be proud.

Mr Thakur Chawla
Editor 'SIPOON' Literary
Sindhi Magazine,
Mahim Mumbai.
Member : Sahitya
Academy, New Delhi.
Member : Maharashtra
Rajya Sindhi Sahitya
Academy.

. . . .

Dear Dr. Borah

As I went through the current issue of 'Yaatra' (Vol 2 No. 1), I came across some of the best authors in Assamese as well as in Indian literature. The journal is informative but it is more important that a number of short stories and poems have been included. It is also good that along with writings of the contemporary authors you have provided some space to such eminent writers of the past as Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva (in the form of reviews) and Hemchandra Goswami.

It is possible for you to give the original version either in Assamese or Roman of the poem included under 'the abiding scene'? This would help us to enjoy the unique music of the Assamese language.

Ramkumar Mukhopadhyay
Regional Secretary
Sahitya Akademi
Regional Office,
Kolkata

. . . .

Dear Prof. Borah,

I have enjoyed going through it and expanding my limited knowledge of happenings in the field of Assamese literature.

I wish other Indian languages, some persons like you, were to bring out similar journals with or without the support of regional academics like the J & K Academy of Art, Culture & Languages and circulate copies to readers in other language. This will go a long way in knitting India, a country so beautiful & bountiful with such rich and varied cultural and literary heritage and current resclaparents.

Congratulations for your initiative of such a project in the land of the rising Sun.

Shivanath
Purvasha, Delhi.

Dear Dr. D.J. Borah

It is an exemplarily produced Mag; and after reading it will be transmitted to a public library of this place so that it can be read by more people. Thanks.

K.S. Narayanan
Thrissur
Kerala

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Dear friend,

I am extremely glad and grateful to you for your kindly sending the 'Yaatra' - journal of Assamese literature and culture. Your untiring effort for the propagation of this sweet and rich literature with religions blending is commendable. For national integration this is a desideratum. I had the fortune to have friendship with a good number of Assamese scholars like Late Dr. Biswanarayan Shasti Ex M.P., Dr. Maheshwar Neog, Dr. Apurba Chandra Barthakuria, Dr. Makunda Madhav Sharma and many others. I have gone through all the writings of Yaatra from which I have derived immense pleasure.

I thank and congratulates all the writers of Yaatra. I think you write 'yâtrâ' instead of Yaatrã which will be correct from the stand point of pronunciation. With thanks and regards.

Mahamahopadhyaya
Prof. Dr. Dhyanesh
Narayan Chakrabarti
West Bengal

• • • • • • • • • • • •

Dear Sir,

One of my relatives has sent me a copy of the first issue of bimonthly magazine 'Yaatra' edited by you. It is simply a great effort with a historic mission, which may take Assamese literature to the world stage. I wish great success of this unique project.

I have read your novel 'Iron workers'. Being a ceramic engineer and being associated with the best steel producers of the world through technical services at present, it was thrilling to know that ingots were made in ancient Assam. I had no clue about the history of iron making in my home state. I would like to know what prompted you to write a novel on a historical plot which is rarely known by all! The novel took me to an unexpected journey. I appreciate you literary endeavor greatly.

Gautom Bardoloi
Manager-Technical Services
Yingkou Economic and
Technical Development
Zone
Liaoning Province
Peoples Republic of China

Dear Borah

Assamese has only 8 vowel sounds unlike Sanskrit. Therefore in Assamese Roman script aa is meaningless and does not exit. It exist in Sanskrit and Hindi. Many educated people copy Hindi and Sanskrit without knowing the sound structure of Assamese. Therefore if you are trying to write the word **Yatraa** with Sanskrit pronunciation, then you are perfectly right. But if you were publishing an English magazine and want to give an Assamese name then it should be **Jatra.**

The bottom line is the Assamese language is a very simple language like Pali. But during the last 150 years, ignorant Assamese have Sankrtised the language. It was started by Hem Kox in opposition to the advise of the British missionaries. As a result we have lost much of the originality. The loss of Assamese sound X in word like **Sankardev,** Satria is a prime example.

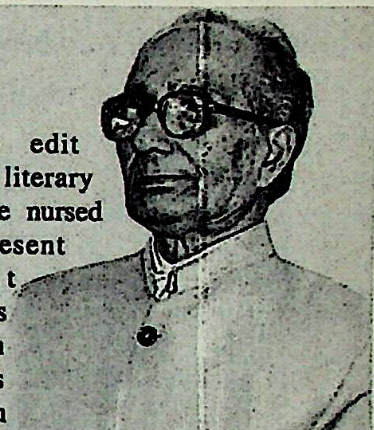
Rajen Barua
Houston, USA

Yaatra as the Bridge between languages and people

In its short existence, *Yaatra*, the journal of Assamese literature and culture, has not only earned appreciation from literature lovers from all the country and abroad but also emerged as a bridge between languages and people. The Editorial Board has received requests for translation, publication, serialisation of the novel and stories published in *Yaatra* from various corners of the country.

The novel *The Iron Workers* by Dr. D.J. Borah published in the inaugural issue is being translated into Malayalam by Prof. John Cyriac of Thrissur. Kerala, for publication into Malayalam. We have received a request from PRATIBHA INDIA for reprinting the following two stories – Harekrishna Deka's 'Why Yudhisthir's story cannot be told' and Apurba Sarma's 'Night at Bahge Tapu', both published in *Yaatra* Vol 2-No. 1. Harekrishna Deka's same story is also being translated into Punjabi and published in Journal of Punjabi Sahit Sabha by Dr. Karanjit Singh. Enquires for translation have also been received from individuals from Gujarat, U.P. (into Hindi), Kashmir and Orissa.

tribute to a great editor and writer Chandraprasad Saikia (1927–2006)



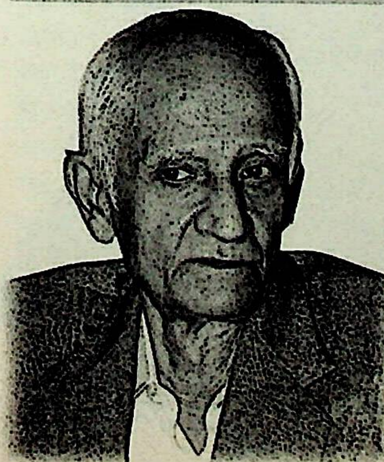
He was the man who could articulate the literary aspirations of Assamese nationalism best. Even those who opposed him liked to believe when he said that only literature could redeem the soul of a nation. He tried to set high standards, to inculcate lofty values into the socio-literary scene of Assam with a passion that at times seemed obsessive. But he was loved for it because it had the ring of genuineness to it.

A man with a varied and colourful life, he jumped actively into the Freedom Struggle while he was still a student and was jailed for it by the British. The values and ideals he imbibed during the Freedom Struggle, he tried to keep alive through his writings and work. His courage to admit mistakes helped him to ride through many controversies with his image intact.

He was a great editor. He edited a very popular daily newspaper of its time and was able to set new standards of journalistic exactness, investigation and unbiased presentation. After his retirement from active journalism with its day-to-day pressure and tensions, he went back to his first love – writing and editing a literary journal. He started with 'Prakash', a literary journal brought out by the publication division, Govt. of Assam, before he joined news journalism as editor and made a great success of it. After retirement he went to edit *Gariyoshi* – a literary journal which he nursed to its present preeminent position. In his long career as an editor he was instrumental in bringing out, nurturing and presenting the largest number of Assamese writers, and poets. He could unerringly spot a talent and once he does it, he practically hounds the writer into writing pieces for his paper or magazine.

He was a very sensitive and significant novelist himself. Towards the late part of his life he devoted himself to re-interpretation and representation of the epics and wrote a hugely popular two-volume novel on Karna of the Mahabharata titled *Maharathi* (the great warrior). It also earned him the title 'Maharathi' which was prefixed to his name by the eager Assamese press.

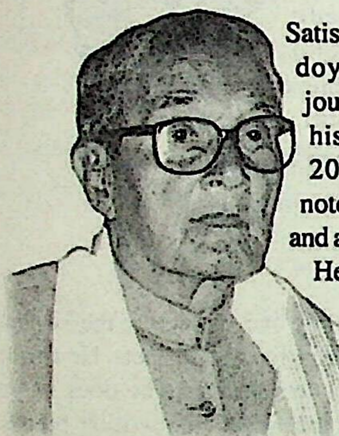
The great outpouring of profound grief at his death only served to reaffirm, the love and respect people had for a real dedicated writer and literary activist editor. He was truly the 'The Grand Old Man of Assamese letters' who could inspire, guide and lead.□



Padum Baruah is no longer with us

Padum Baruah, noted film-maker, who added a new dimension to Assamese cinematic art by his acclaimed film *Ganga Chilonir Pakhi,* died on 25 July 2006 at the age of 82. A great fan of Satyajit Roy, Baruah was one of the founders of first ever film society of the North East. Baruah, a serious film-maker, was acclaimed for his knowledge of music and screen plays – he himself wrote the screen play of *Ganga Chilonir Pakhi*, directed the film and also its music. He also made three documentaries. The serious film-makers of the present generation of Assam still looks up to his film for inspiration and guidance.□

Satis Ch. Kakati leaves behind a legacy of ethical journalism



Satis Chandra Kakati, a doyen in Assamese journalism, breathed his last on 19 June 2006. He was a noted freedom fighter and a veteran journalist. He was the editor of ***The Assam Tribune*** and the founder editor of the Assamese weekly paper ***Asom Bani.***

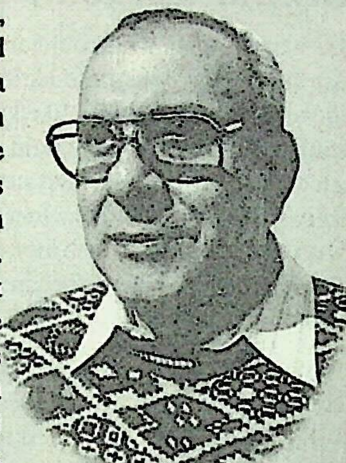
Equally at home in Assamese and English, Kakati authored more than half a dozen of books including ***Nehru Aru Soviet Russia*** (Assamese), which won him the 'Soviet Desh Nehru Award'. He was honoured with the 'Padmashree' in 1991. Lakshinath Phukan Award in 1999, Lokopriyo Gopinath Borodoloi Award in 2002 and Swahid Mukunda Kakati Award in 2004-05.

Born in the rural backwaters of Kamrup (presently Nalbari) district, he studied in local schools when the call of the freedom movement attracted him. He joined the freedom movement in the protest against the infamous Cunningham circular and was jailed in 1930. Still he managed to graduate with honours from Cotton college and was also the editor of the Cottonian. He started his career as a teacher and then went on to the Government job. In 1967 he came to the world of journalism and became the Assistant Editor of The Assam Tribune.

Kakati was a person who was actively associated with Congress politics and various social and governmental bodies. A regular contributor of various national dailies, Kakati tried to present the problems of Assam and the N.E. before the nation.

As a journalist Kakati was one of the rare breed who followed strict professional and ethical standards and was able to command respect from all.□

Ishan Barua passes away



Noted artiste, director, and author, Ishan Barua breathed his last on 6 July 2006 at the age of 66. He was suffering from high viral fever. One of the most active stage personalities of his time, Barua directed several stage plays including *Toghlak, Ma, Sako* and *Aurangzeb,* a few tele-documentary films and acted in Assamese feature films including *Lalita, Nayanmoni Sandhyarag, Suruj.* Barua, an excellent reciter, tried his hands at writing and authored several books including one on *Aunondaram Barooah.* His passing away has created an aching void in Assamese cultural sphere.□

The doyen of Sattriya dance is no more

Rameswar Barbayan, one of the most distinguished exponents of *Sattriya* dance and music, breathed his last on 14 July 2006 due to a massive cardiac arrest. A celibate monk of the Kamalabari Sattra (monastery), he had devoted his life to propagation of *Sattriya* art form. He was a great teacher, a thinker and a great artist who has taught and inspired hundreds of students all over the state in both dance and music of *Sattriya* (monastic) culture of Assam.□





mixed media

Retired IAS officer Jyotiprasad Saikia has joined as Consulting Editor of *Dainik Asom*, a reputed Assamese daily. Mr Saikia, a bureaucrat of the Government of Assam addressed literature while still in service. His reincarnation as a journalist would be interesting to watch.□



... in apposition

Noted poet, short story writer and literary critic, Harekrishna Deka, one of the members of the advisory panel of ***Yaatra***, has joined as the editor of ***Gariyoshi***, a widely circulated monthly Assamese magazine, after the demise of Chandraprasad Saikia, its founder editor. Mr. Deka's administrative skills as a top ranking police officer - he retired as DGP of Assam - and his life-long passion for literature will definetly lead ***Gariyoshi*** to still greater heights.□

Yaatra goes to Frankfurt

Yaatra – has reached Germany. Copies of the journal were handed over to eminent literary persons in Germany during the Curtain Raiser Event to Frankfurt World Book Fair 2006 held at Leibzig from 16th to 18th March 2006. Moushumi Kandali, a member of the Yaatra team, was there as part of the delegation of Indian bhâsa authors to the Frankfurt Book Fair Curtain Raiser Event. During this function and her subsequent official tour to different cities in Germany such as Berlin, Frankfurt, Hamburg, Munich, Ausburg, Halle, Herrschling and others. She presented her literary works to the authors, publishers, media and general public and discussed the present literary scene of Assam. Copies of ***Yaatra*** were handed over to eminent personalities like Dr. Peter Weidhaas, writer, journalist and ex-director of Frankfurt World Book Fair; Dr. Maria Sdstish, the Chief coordinator of the Book Fair and an eminent author-scholar etc., and also to the Library of University of Halle, which received warm welcome and enthusiastic response. A copy of ***Yaatra*** was also displayed in the official stall of India, during the Leibzig Book Fair and the Curtain Raiser Event, where contemporary works of Indian bhâ sa literature were showcased.□



An intimate discussion on Yaatra and Assamese literature in Germany on occassion of Curtain Raiser Event to Frankfurt World Book Fair 2006.

mountain harvest :
the food of arunachal pradesh

Mountain Harvest
(The food of Arunachal Pradesh)
Published by Anwesha, Guwahati
First Edition : 2005
pp. 78
Price : Rs. 325.00



Mountain Harvest- the Food of Arunachal Pradesh by Mamang Dai is a beautifully illustrated recent publication of Anwesha.

Every cuisine has its own history and it is also a cultural component. Ms. Dai with her intimate understanding of the people and culture of Arunnachal Pradesh tells us the story of each cuisine with all its nuances in a distinctive style. This book will not only showcase the foodstuffs of Arunachal Pradesh but also the cultural heritage of one of the most picturesque states of the North-East.

In the promotion of Arunachal Pradesh as the tourist destination of the millennium much has been written about the state's scenic beauty, its culture, festivals and traditional practices. An area of potential popularity that remained untapped was the realm of food.



Mamang Dai is a journalist and a reputed author. She has to her credit two more books namely Arunachal Pradesh: The Hidden Land and River Poems. She has received accolades from critics and discerning readers for her erudition and distinctive style. Ms. Dai has traveled widely in India and abroad. She now lives in Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh.

Like its diverse and colourful cultural heritage, Arunachali food is a vast and heady mix of various ingredients, preparations and esoteric items, including the well-known local brew common to all the communities of the state.

In this context the book *Mountain Harvest – The Food of Arunachal Pradesh,* is an attempt to draw attention to the varied local cuisine for purposes of documentation of the same, and also to provide information and inspire curiosity and stir the spirit of adventure for potential visitors to the state through the common, basic medium of food.

The book provides a colourful insight into the world of the hunter-gatherer in an environment that once dictated the types of food and their preparation in their remote hill homes. The text also offers insight into the mythology and beliefs behind certain practices and traditional items of food that are today still served as delicacies or speciality items on festive occasions.

The book is divided into six simple chapters that broadly cover the sixteen districts of the state beginning with rice preparations, meat and poultry, the food of the northern Buddhist tribes, the myth and practice of brewing rice beer, fruits and berries, and the ever-popular accompaniments of varieties of fiery chutneys and pastes.

The chapters are interspeised with informative snippets on food taboos, the role of women, agricultural practice, and the mythological origins of the two best known and well loved animals of the state – the mithun and the yak. A section of the book also has a description of edible insects and local specialities. ❑

study of history and tradition and its value



Samaj Sankat Sanghati
Published by Student Stores, Guwahati
First edition : 2005
pp : 144
Price : Rs. 50.00

Paramananda Majumdar is a well known writer of present day Assam. His essay collection ***Prabad Pratibad*** has been warmly received by the reading public. Like Dr. Sivanath Barman and Prosenjit Choudhury, Majumbar too is a non-traditional critic, who has been trying to illuminate us with his distinctive analysis of our history and tradition. The efforts of such wrtiers remind us of the fossilized ideas in our tradition. They are a source of inspiration for us because by this way they might contribute to the making of our future.

Majumdar is discussing nation, nationality and the Assamese nationality in the very first article of this collection. A nationality is born out of assimilation and it can not remain pure. The idea of rationalism grows in such a process. However, a nationality is not born if there are no humanistic and democratic values. In this article Majumdar is highlighting in detail how the idea of nationality is transforming itself from parochalism to liberal humanism and hinting at the wide role of the Assamese language. He has identified a few notable personalities of the bygone era who had by pointing out the various crises catalised the assimilation process. Notable among them were Bhimbar Dewri, Kamala Kanta Bhattacharya, Lakhmidhar Sarmah, Jyotiprasad Agarwala, Bishnu Rabha, Bhabananda Dutta and Hemanga Biswas. Their progressive role has been discussed in detail in first part of this collection. The short life of Bhimbar Dewri is examplery. He fought for education, economic and socio-cultural development of the tribal communities of Assam and at the

same time dreamt of a greater Assam like Bishnuprasad Rabha. Dewri also took a firm stand during the grouping issue. Elucidating Dewri's thinking in detail Majumdar has succeeded in establishing him as a forbearer of rational thinking. Readers would know a great deal about the greatness of this now forgotten leader from this article. The article titled 'Kamalakanta aru Asomar Sanskarbadi Aitijya' would also provide much food for thought. Though he was born in a Brahmin family', Komalakanta became a Brahmo and married a widow. He bravely fought against casteism, umtouchability and exploitation and argued for women's education. He was not parochial, even though he talked of linguistic nationalism. He tried to understand the problems faced by the tribal people. Kamalakanta severly criticized the then Assamese society. In Majumdar's words, his thinking was 'nearly revolutionary'. Barring certain debatable views, he could rightly be called a giant of his time.

'Lakhmidhar Sarmah and Sanskarbadi Aitijya' is another thought provoking article of this collection. Sarmah was a certainly talented literary figure endowed with sensitive rational thinking within his rather short span of life. He sought to make the people aware of the regressive ideas ruling the society. It is not hard to imagine what could be in the mind of a writer who penned stories like Siraj and Bidrohini. He not only fought for reform but also sought to humanise politics and economics.

Much has been written about Jyotiprasad and Bishnu Rabha in our language. Majumdar too is discussing these two stalwarts. The thinking and works of Jyotiprasad were truly wideranging. That the Assamese language and nationality were the products of assimilation was highlighted in his thinking. Perhaps it was he who first categorically showed us that culture is the root of economics and politics. Similarly denying linguistic nationalism Bishnu Rabha talked about cultural assimilation. Assamese people could never forget this duo who sought to transform the society with people at the centre.



Nalinidhar Bhattacharya is a well known academician, poet and critic in Assamese literature.

I think whatever the Assamese middle class has achieved till date, it is due to the untiring efforts of these two stalwarts. Their sacrifice would go in vain if the wave of liberalization, privatisation and globalisation make our middle class too self-centred. But still I am hopeful. Majumdar is also focusing on the intellect and the socio-economic views of Bhabananda Dutta. Dutta pointed out that there could be no difference between social welfare and the practice of culture. The intellectual crisis of the middle class grew out of its inability to understand this during Dutta's time. His role in resolving this is worth remembering. Hemanga Biswas was the sea-gull of the Surama Valley. But he sang for the downtrodden of the Brahmaputra Valley after coming to touch with Jyotiprasad and Bishnu Rabha. One would need to know him well to understand what peoples theatre and folk culture stand for.

Majumdar's articles on Bhabananda Dutta and Hemanga Biswas would be of special interest to the reader.

In the second part of this collection is an important article on Sonar Chand. Majumdar says, Sonar Chand's essay published in the *Orunodoi* titled 'Anek Biya Kara Ajugut' was memorable one in context of those days. It is worth pointing here that this essay has not been included in the two collected volumes of the magazine published of late. Majumdar has copied this essay from the volumes preserved in the National Library. It does not require to mention that Sonar Chand was no other than Hemchandra Baruah. Baruah's scathing criticism of repressing social customs prevalent during his time troubled the traditionalists. Majumdar also cites the example of Lakshminath Bezbaruah and Nakul Chandra Bhuyan in this article. The article on 'Bhagoban Chandra Das' included in this part is also noteworthy. These articles would make the reader aware of our reformist ideas.

The role of Asom Hitaisi (1925-28), the newspaper edited by Kamalakanta Bhattacharya and Mahadev Sarmah, was known for its secular and objective views, has been discussed in another article. This newspaper highlighted issues like Hindu-Muslim unity, womens education, Swaraj and economic independence. Majumdar has called for an indepth research on this newspaper. In the last article of this collection, Majumdar has given a detailed account of Ratneswar Mahanta's parochial thinking as expressed in his article Garo Brittanta which was published in the 'Assam Bandhu'. It is worth while to point here that the collected volume of Assam Bandhu has been edited by Dr. Nagen Saikia while Ratneswar Mahanta's collected works has been edited by Dr. Jogendra Narayan Bhuyan. Majumdar's point is that the text of the article has not been published as in the original volume edited by Dr. Bhuyan. But the same has been included in full in the volume edited by Dr. Saikia. Majumdar claims that Dr. Bhuyan has unauthorisedly edited the article to cover up Mahanta's reactionary thinking. Dr. Bhuyan has answered Majumdar's questions but he is not convinced. Mahanta was a well-sknown writer of his time and he had vast knowledge of Garo society. But his views regarding the tribe were far from liberal. In history and the norm is to present the history as it happened. I too belive Dr. Bhuyan should have examined the matter deeply. I hope the article would be included in the original in the future edition of the collected works of Ratneswar Mahanta. This collection of Majumdar's articles can justly be said to have discovered a few memorable writers and thinkers. Majumdar deserves special thanks for the endeavour. ❑

these hills called home

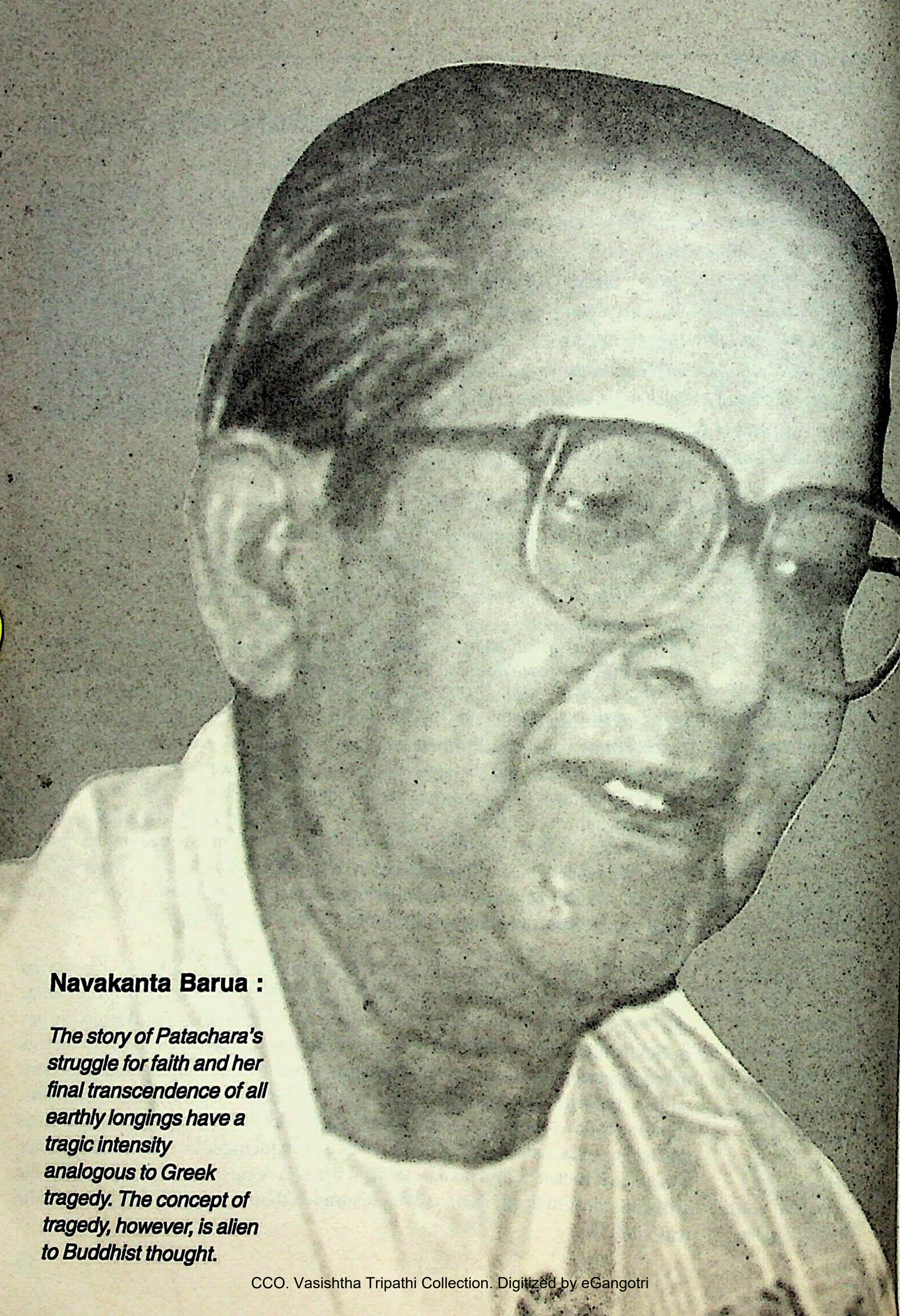


These Hills Called Home
Published by Penguin Books
First edition : 2006
pp : 147
Price : Rs. 195.00

Paresh Malakar: A genuine book lover and the prime mover behind the Spring Festival of Books for Children, Malakar is the President of Anwesha, a reputed NGO of Assam. Malakar and a band of committed friends associated with Anwesha have promoted good books by holding small book fairs in small towns and rural areas of Assam.

These Hills Called Home is a collection of ten stories by Temsula Ao, Profes sor of English, and Dean of School of Humanities and Education, North Eastern Hill University, Shillong The backdrop of the stories is the trouble-torn Nagaland of post independent India. The stories in this collection present the awe, pains and traumas of a people caught in the whirlpool of violence caused by the conflicts between the rebels and the state. Never before have we come across such a powerful portrayal of Naga life in fiction. In a sense when we look back at our own predicaments we feel that these stories are not only the stories of Nagaland they are also the stories of the entire North-East which is also caught in the quagmire of violence. This book has not received the attention it deserves. I am sure if Temsula Ao had come from some metropolitan city she would have attracted much more focus and attention than what she has received now.

Temsula Ao uses a non-pretentious, simple fictional narrative. She tells the stories without any bias. May be this simple style is the outer expression of her inner calm and also the result of clear understanding of the realities she depicts in her stories. Unlike the contemporary scene of Indian writings in English which is mired in the complexities of cosmopolitan and metropolitan milieus and sentimentalities she writes about ordinary people and their life, their sufferings and pains. Here she follows the path of early masters of Indian writings in English who used this language as a medium of expression and even moulded it to their convenience and made it Indian in form and content. What is lacking in her stories? May be the artificial constructions, designs which some authors so artfully mixes with the real-vital! ❑



Navakanta Barua :

The story of Patachara's struggle for faith and her final transcendence of all earthly longings have a tragic intensity analogous to Greek tragedy. The concept of tragedy, however, is alien to Buddhist thought.

Navakanta Barua

patachara

Translated by **Pradip Acharya**

Sorrows and grief abound in life as they do in Buddhist lore but the tragic sense negates itself in the fourth of the Aryasatyas. As grief has a source or a beginning, it must have a solution or end. This story has a skeletal presence in the Therigatha and the Atthakatha. Navakanta Barua gives body to the tale without deviating from its Buddhist essence but he addresses it from a modern urban vantage. The karma-determined

A woman has been seen walking around nude in Shravasti for the past few days. She was singularly attractive, yet somehow subdued, as if veiled by clouds. Her gage was unengaged, unseeing. She looks all around her but registers nothing. The dignified wayfarers look away; the crafty steal glances and then move away lest someone should notice. The children run about shouting, the witch! The witch! The naughty ones throw stones at her. Some grownups stare at the nude woman while apparently yelling at them. One thing was sure. She was mad. None but the insane would walk about so, divested and uncaring. Some say she might be a *bhairabi*. She could even be *Mahamaya*, the mother of the world herself, roaming about in disguise, through rows of shops, next to the gardens, down the main street...

Lord Buddha was in Jetavana then. There are his routine religious discourses at morning and evening. The *bhiksu sangha* and worshippers who are householders come to listen to his religious precepts. The *bhiksus* were already there and the worshippers were gathering. They are all family men. Soon as they meet they start talking about this and that. Even though the Buddha had often remonstrated with them not to discuss mundane matters or indulge in gossip, they could not help talking about the nude woman. ' She's absolutely young, someone said. Someone else quipped, the crazy and beauty! Maybe she went mad because of her beauty.

'No, she is in the thrall of 'Mar', challenged a new *bhiksu,* who had recently heard the Buddha refer to an evil spirit called Mar, just to show off his learning.

Almost at that instant, the Buddha was seen moving towards the *mandalmal*, with Ananda and Sariputra. One *bhiksu* called out aloud," You'd better stop this talk. Bhagaban Tathagata is approaching.'

Everyone was alert. Lord Buddha came and sat facing the west. The *bhiksus* made the customary three recitals:' *Namo tassa bhagavato Arahato sanma sambuddhasam* '[ ].The worshippers too joined in. Tathagata arahato samma sambuddha, that is, the Buddha, looked around at all. There was the feeling that he immediately apprehended what they all had been thinking. The

Buddha started a *gatha*:

Piyato jayate sokon piyote jayate bhayanm
Piyato bippammuttassa natthi sokon kuto bhayanm.

(Sorrow springs from the loved, the loved is the source of fear; he who is free of the loved has no sorrow, and where ever would fear be?)

As soon as the Buddha completed his *gatha* the pavilion resounded with the recital of *sadhu, sadhu, sadhu!* Whenever the Buddha or others do *dharmadesana,* gives religious precepts, it was the traditional encomium during or after *dharmadesana.*

The Buddha looked at the congregation again and continued:

[1]

Pemoto jayato sokon pemote jayote bhayam
Pemoto bippamuttassa natthi sokon kuto bhayam

(Love alone engenders sorrow, as it brings fear, one who frees him from the ties of love, has no sorrows, and knows no fear)

The encomium, *sadhubad,* followed. But as all this was going on there was a commotion in the distance. The worshippers knew what it was all about. It must be that deranged woman. But was she coming towards the pavilion? Perhaps she was. After all, from the general commotion you could make out a line or a phrase: shoo her away, where has this mad woman come from, beat her up, Such a shameless creature, walking about naked, fie upon you! And she was really blundering towards the pavilion!

The Buddha's aspect was tranquil. But the *bhiksus* were anxious, especially Ananda. Was it another trick of the crafty Devadutta, who has been opposing the Buddha right from his childhood. Devadutta cannot tolerate the Gautama's renown and influence. Once he had sent a public woman to discomfit him while he was giving his *dharmadesana.* She was called Chincha. She had come just about this hour with a piece of log tied to her stomach. She had come and said, 'Come let's go then. How would it do if sit pretty here? Your child is about to be born. Arrange a place for us.' Lord Buddha just looked at her once and said, ' Sister, whether what you are saying is false or true, I know and you know too.'

As soon he looked at her and said ' you know too', Chicha was shaken and as she escaped the scene her wooden stomach fell on the ground. And soon thereafter the earth parted and sucked her in. Maybe she committed suicide in repentance.

Ananda was worried if it was another conspiracy of Davadutta's. An elderly bhisu said, 'She,s really close to the pavilion now. Do something, Lord. Ayusman Ananda, *bhante*, do something.'

The Buddha was in *samadhi* then. He was looking without batting an eyelid. No one could surmise what he saw.

tragic events of life make Patachara demented. The Buddha gives her self-knowledge and helps her situate herself in a higher plane of knowing and acceptance. The process is amazingly similar to modern psychiatric practices, especially to logotherapy. The Buddha makes Patachara relive and recreate her memory in its totality in order to get the better of it. It is a story of mental/spiritual metamorphosis. The Buddha diagnoses Patachara's state as insanity and believes there might be a relapse if she is not cleansed by a total immersion in her past, in her memories. The

Ananda wanted to but refrained from asking the Buddha anything. He spoke rapidly to the *bhiksus* instead. ' You *bhiksus*, please give her a cheebar, her nudity pains us all.'

One *bhiksu* went up and threw a *cheebar* to the deranged woman. It hit her and fell to the ground. She barely noticed it. The elderly bhiksu was uneasy. 'Bhante, she didn't even notice it. Fie on her, our dignity and sense of shame would be compromised now!' Ananda was agitated. 'If she wouldn't accept our cloth, restrain her, keep her from coming here.' The bhiksus also said about the same thing. ' No, don't let the nude woman come here. Fie upon her! What a situation, so embarrassing!'

The worshippers were all the more perturbed, excited. 'A nude in the pavilion of Tathagata! Drive her away.' The voice of the Buddha was heard then.

'Ayusman Ananda!

Everyone was silent. Again that voice...

Bhiksus!

The *bhiksus* were all attention now. The Buddha said:

'Are the Buddha's doors ever barred? Can they ever be barred?

They all said almost in one voice, 'No, Lord, never.' Ananda hesitated but finally said, 'It is true that the doors of *Arahata Sammasambuddha* are never closed, but this woman here is disrobed, divested'

A strange smile played in the Buddha's lips.

Beneath these our garments, under our investiture, our bodies are bare too, Ananda! Look deeper within with the mind's eye, under our *cheebar*, the skin, under the skin, flesh, inside you have blood and fat, and still under you have the scaffoldings of bones, and, further inside the excreta.'

ideas of nirvana and parinirvana are often evoked to explain one of the most complex gathas by Patachara, but the idea is to immerse oneself in life with a view to transcending it. Patachara's gatha says that you have a feel of nirvana when you dip the burning wick in the oil in the lamp to extinguish it.

Ananda hung his head. He knows that the transience of the body should be meditated on through these ungainly thoughts. Tathagata used always to say, 'This body is nothing but a city of bones, with a dabbing of blood and flesh and a covering of skin – and the insides harbour ignorance and ego.' They are fine, true. Yet...

Ananda said almost despairingly, 'Lord, the *bhiksus* don this investiture at your instance to ward off the cold and heat and for propriety; as the worshippers dress themselves. The Tathagata had himself opposed that an initiated Jaina could worship unclad. And this woman here is divested, improper and bare. Moreover, she refused our clothes.'

The Buddha continued in the same unruffled tone, you wanted to give her clothes because you thought it was necessary. It was your sense of propriety She is not feeling that clothes are necessary for her. She will definitely accept them when she feels it is necessary.

Ananda said in the same embarrassed tone, 'Lord, could not quite follow..' The Buddha smilingly said, 'this woman needs no clothes now, because she has no

consciousness. Her nudity troubles your ego, which you are calling decency or propriety. She is beyond registering anything now. She would wear clothes whenever she needs them. May not be her usual apparel…'

The Buddha is very dear to Ananda, and unerring. Yet he does not think he quite understands him sometimes. He wondered if he should tell him that Devadutta's hand might be there in all these. No, that won't do. The world-knowing Sammasmbuddha will know all these. So he said instead, Yes, lord, Mar has made her deranged.'

The Buddha smiled; it was almost a mannerism with his facvourite disciple to think of mar whenever something unbecoming happens. The evil effects of Mar… or the thirst of the mother… He said to Ananda, 'Madness is an ailment, Ananda. We just have to keep in mind that she is a woman, a human being.'There was again an excitement in the pavilion. There were grumbles and whispers of protest. The crazy one entered the pavilion. ..

The buddha's voice turned graver and rose above the turmoil, 'Do not restrain her. Let her come.' Then he looked at the stony eyes of the mad one and said, '*ehi wahini*, come sister.'

As if words had magic, wahini…*bhagini*…the word from the Buddha seemed to startle the crazed woman! She repeated…wahini…bhagini…. After this her eyes were riveted on the Buddha, as if whatever she had seen before was unmeaning. This time she really seemed to register something; she really saw.

'You? Whoever are you? Me, who am I? Without really seeming to ask she said quietly, in the interrogative, who are you?

The *bhiksus* appeared to be relieved. They started saying solemnly, the Great compassionate, World-knowing, Bhagavan Arahata Sammasasambuddha is talking to you, woman.'

Neither her mind nor her ears registered anything they had said. There was nothing about her. She was surrounded by emptiness. Only her eyes appeared to *look at another pair* of eyes, those of the Buddha. The Buddha said, 'I am what you are, *Bhagini.* Would you just think who you are but once, if you know who you are you will know me…' That woman stood dazed for some time. Words welled out from her mouth, unconnected, incoherent. 'Me, you, me…you are my father, she almost shouted and looked all around her. Her look was not empty now. As if through a haze she seemed to discern certain shapes, familiar, human faces. Then she looked at herself and sat down crouching, covering her breasts and arms with her hands.

The Buddha looked at Ananda and said, 'Aysman Ananda, She needs clothes now-not for us, for herself.'

Ananda covered that nude dust obscured body with a cloth piece. She wrapped it around herself and started wailing. And then again a string of incoherent words… snakes…snakes, like rivers…a hawk…a caged myna… my child…the hawk…shoo…'

The *bhiksus* started talking among themselves. 'She is coming to…but not in her senses yet… a kind of delirium!'

The Buddha's voice was heard again, 'I, Buddha, am telling you the second time, Sister, be conscious.'

She again looked at the Buddha...a man in the haze, in the smoke...what a tranquil face! And the deep voice! Then she looked at the other faces around her...anxious but calm faces!

'Tell me, please, who are you?' Ananda announced solemnly, 'this is Lokabidu Param Karunik, Bhgavan, Arahata, Sammasambudha. We are the followers of the Tathagata, the *Bhiksusamha*. Tell us who you are.'

Her hair was streaming loose. She removed it from her forehead. Her word sounded half delirious, half symbolic. 'Me, who am I? This here is the forest, a river, and there's smoke...evening smoke in the cowshed...a pyre...one, two, three pyres smoking.'

It seemed as if the Buddha would fix the images in her mind in their proper order. He said 'I, Buddha, am telling you for the third time-'Sister, get back your consciousness, your memories, think, think, will you'

That woman, obscured by dust again looked at the Buddha's eyes. There was compassion in the Buddha's eyes, distressed entreaty in hers.

'O man, whoever you are, take me away from this smoke and haze.' Then there was an anguished smile in her face, 'You are taking me away- I am going back, I am returning.'

There was a hum of joy among the *bhiksusamha* and the worshippers. 'She is beginning to remember. Her words now seem to have a semblance of meaning.'

The Buddha looked at Ananda and said, 'Ananda, Leave this our sister with and under the care of *sanghasthabira mahaprajapati* Gautomy. Delirium becomes memories only when the mind and body are rested. The path of memory is the path of cure. After rest and food we would know her as she would know her and perhaps, us too.'

Ananda has to run the Samha. Consequently, he likes to follow some rules and customs. Moreover, the Lord Buddha is close to him. He remembered his responsibilities and said:

'And what would be her identity, Lord?'

'She will be staying as *shramonery*. She has lost her past. Her sole refuge is the present and the future.'

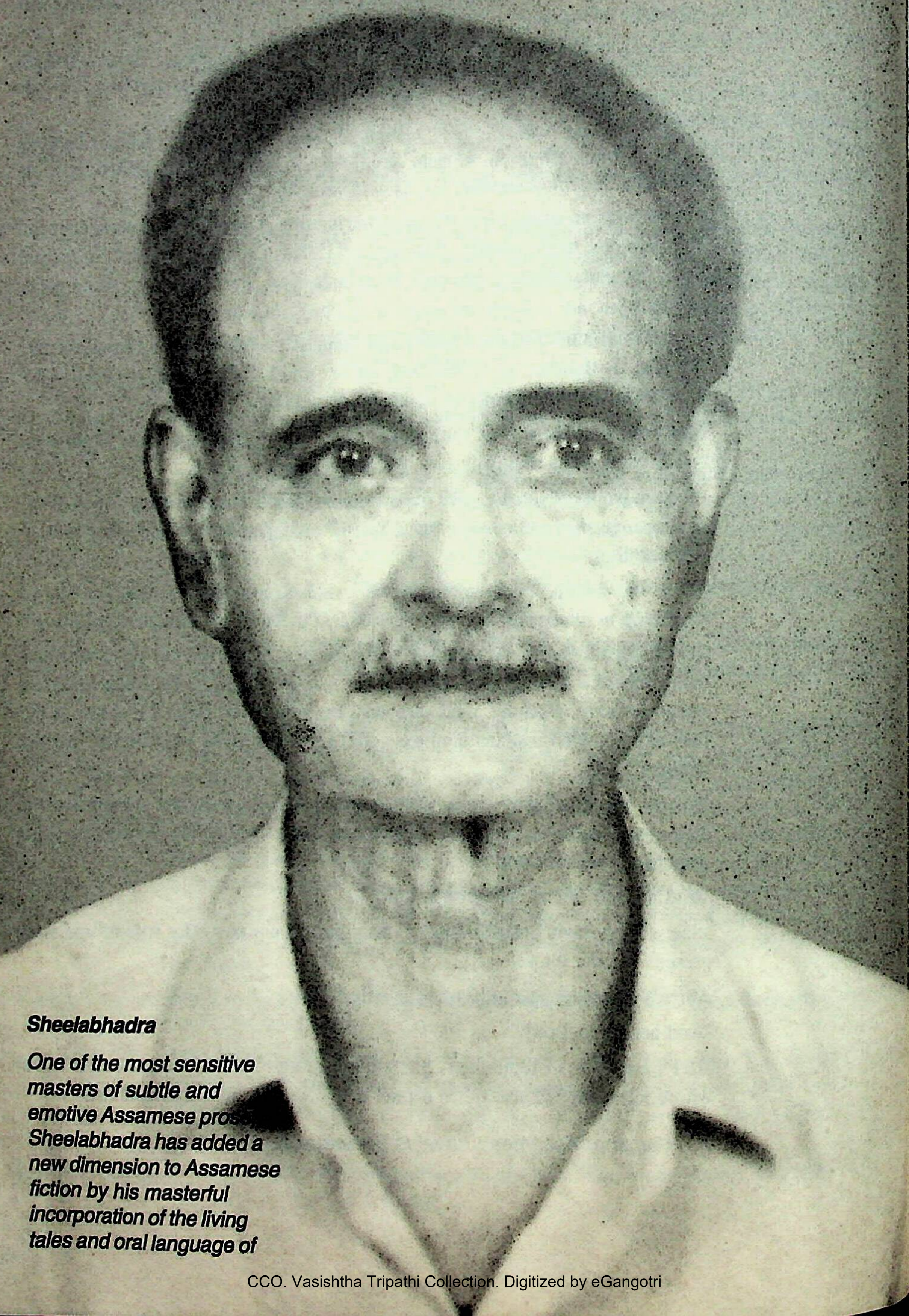
Ananda did not appear to be quite satisfied.

'And her name, Lord?'

'Her past name is redundant. She would be known as Patachara. She is one whose loincloth had also fallen off her in her worldly struggle-*patta achara*.

*(The original Assamese novel is **Patachara**)*

(to be continued)



Sheelabhadra

One of the most sensitive masters of subtle and emotive Assamese prose, Sheelabhadra has added a new dimension to Assamese fiction by his masterful incorporation of the living tales and oral language of

Sheelabhadra

twilight

Translated by Rani Dutta Choudhury

the people of the westernmost part of the Brahmapurtra valley into the mainstream. Thus he has expanded the knit of the national mosaic of the state and enriched its literature. This novel – a poignant study of loneliness of an old man at the twilight of his life and the reaction of the society and his near and dear ones at his death brings out in stark reality both the beauty and tragedy of man's sojourn on this earth.
This is the work of a refined writer who is a master of his art.

Bhudev Choudhury died in his sleep. No one knew the exact moment. Wondering why his master was not yet up, Jagen, his servant, called out to him repeatedly in vain. Alarmed, Jagen ran and got Madan Das from next door. Das had just started his scooter to go to his office.

'Uncle, Uncle !'

No response. Madan Das got worried. Meanwhile two or three neighbors came and joined them. Mrinal happened to be there on the scene. He knew how to get into the locked house. He prised open a window that faced west and tumbled in.

He soon appeared at the front door and unlocked it. His face was somber. Bhudev Choudhury was dead. He lay peacefully in the bed, and perhaps had lain there lifeless for several hours. No sign of struggle. The toothless face looked sunken but free of pain.

Soon, Bhudev Choudhury's two daughters arrived. Ranu was calm and reserved. She immediately took charge and cooperated with her husband Dr. Ramesh Barua. Anita, the younger daughter, cried hysterically as she entered the house. She got more and more hysterical until she wore herself out and held on to her father, distraught but quiet. Anita had always been the one to be pampered and spoiled.

Relatives and friends quickly gathered. Dr. Barua, sent someone with his car to Kunja Thakur's store to get what would be needed for the cremation. A group of young boys were getting the bamboo bier ready for the corpse.

A few elderly men spoke together in subdued tones. Young men stood around, a few sat down on the grass. Among the older group were Dibakar Das, who lived near by, Gajanan Roy, Robin Saharia, Sarat Lahkar, and Ratikanta Kalita. People streamed in from the city also.

Ratikanta was saying, 'I met him yesterday evening. I was looking for my cow behind Sarma's house. Sometimes she waits there. Choudhury was coming back from his walk. I was worried about the cow so I barely talked to him.'

'Is that so?' said Dibakar Das, 'Yes, he was a good man. The other day he asked about my black cow. She had some swelling.'

'Swelling? Where?'

'Her throat. She couldn't eat anything.'

Gajanan Roy said, 'Wait, I met him the other day. About three days ago, he wanted some Dahlia bulbs. I never got around to giving him any. I feel bad about that.' Robin Saharia remembered the last days of his beloved dog Tom, an Alsatian. Toward the end, Tom couldn't stand up straight. He dragged himself trailing his hind legs. It was heart wrenching to watch him. If Saharia put his hand on Tom's head, he would still wag his tail weakly. It was painful to recall him. Today he wouldn't have to suffer so much. The veterinarian would take care of it with 50cc's of Nembutal. He would sleep peacefully forever.

'Of course,' said Saharia, 'it was a painless death. He did not suffer, and, after all, he was old.'

Sadananda Hazarika did not like the last remark. His face showed displeasure.

'Don't talk about age. How old was he? Just the other day both of us walked to the wedding reception of Bordoloi's son. If you are fit, age doesn't mean anything. How old is Morarji Desai?'

Sarat Lahkar felt himself wishing that before his own death, his eldest son Kanu would similarly die in his sleep -- painlessly. He shivered when he realized the trend his thoughts were taking. He got up abruptly.

'What can I do staying? Let me leave.'

The Choudhury daughters were inside. Lahkar called out to Choudhury's younger son-in-law Ramen.

'What can you do? If you are born, you are destined to die.'

Ramen quickly suppressed a mouthful of cigarette smoke and moved away without replying. Lahkar, feeling slighted, stared at his retreating back and started to leave.

Meanwhile, the young men were struggling to maintain a mood of appropriate gravity. The struggle to keep out any hint of merriment from their faces showed in their slightly strange expressions.

So long Madan Das could not butt in their conversation. He saw his chance and took it with both hands.

'The same thing happened to my uncle. He called everyone to his bedside after the evening meal. He summoned Sashi Pandit to read from the Gita. We were perplexed. Late at night he wished to be taken outside. There was hesitation. The man seemed fine. He got angry. 'What are you doing? My time has come. Take me out.' We carried him out and placed him under the basil plant. He asked for prayers and hymns to be recited. His lips moved, 'Narayan, Narayan.' That was the end. Someone remarked that this was the manner of death for people with unblemished souls. Someone disagreed just for the sake of disagreement.

'Yesterday I read about the notorious dacoit in Madhya Pradesh. Police bullets hit his head and killed him instantly. Was he a blemishless soul?'

Ramen quickly repressed a smile. He looked around guiltily and put on an expression of studied seriousness.

The cremation had to wait. Someone had gone to hire a truck. Even the promise of good money did not find many truck owners willing to have their vehicles used

to carry a corpse.

Robin Saharia left. The other old men followed. Sadananda Hazarika on his way out had an insatiable curiosity. He hurried back. He approached Ramen and asked, 'What are you doing with the house? Are you selling it?'

Ramen looked at him uncomprehendingly and remained silent. Offended, Hazarika went out through the gate again. He could have bought the house if the price was reasonable.

In slow and careful steps Nibaran Kumar approached Choudhury's house. He stopped at the wooden gate and leaned on it, supporting himself on his elbows. In the middle of the day he was roaring drunk. A thin figure, with a pasty face and hollow eyes, mucus clung to the corners of these eyes.

'Choudhury died? Splendid, splendid!'

His stance hindered people from getting in or out of the house. He inched away slightly when someone complained. He chuckled to himself.

'He told me just the other day, 'Kumar Sahib, you are getting old. Drop this habit. You walk around unsteadily on the streets. You will be knocked down one day.' I told him, 'Don't worry. I will not leave before you. I will be at your cremation before my turn comes. Wasn't I right?'

He wiped his eyes. He clung to anyone who passed by and explained.

'Choudhury was a good man. Not like me. We have to stay and suffer. Suffering was not for him.' Meanwhile, the things necessary for the cremation were readied by some of the young men. One of the men spoke sharply to Kumar for blocking the way.

'Please move aside, please make way!'

Nibaran looked at the man from head to toe, then slowly lurched toward the house.

The old men had already gone. Nibaran slipped behind a tree and took a gulp from a bottle hiding in his attire.

Kumar saw Ramen before him and somehow managed to keep his balance by placing his hand on the young man's shoulder.

'You don't know what I know. You will not find another man like him. Everything is going down in quality. Even God does not make men like him anymore.'

Ramen smiled, quickly looked around and became serious again.

Choudhury's body was lifted onto the truck. Ranu stood outside the gate gravely, wiping away her tears. Anita was inconsolable and had to be held by relatives.

Trying to get into the truck on unsteady legs, Nibaran Kumar tripped and fell over on the street. Some hurried to help him up. Some snapped at him.

'But I gave him my word,' Kumar whispered.

'What?'

'I will only die after cremating him.'

Ranu hurried forward and brought of the situation under control.

'Help him up. Careful. Don't let him get hurt.'

(2)

Friends used to address Nibaran Kumar as Nibaran Sahib in Calcutta. In those days Bhudev Choudhury and his friends wore Dhoti and Kameez and the comfortable leather sandals called Kabuli sandals. The winter cold was warded off by a thin *endi* shawl.

Kumar Sahib preferred to dress as if he was actually one. Dressed in suit and tie, he lounged around, cigarette in hand, choosing not to grace classes with his presence. Dormitory rules were conveniently lax. Kumar's drinking habit started early. The watchman was happy to be the procurer. He was generously rewarded.

Bhudev Choudhury and Nibaran Kumar were not supposed to become friends. They were creatures from different worlds. Yet they grew close. Biswajit Chaliha took Choudhury to Kumar's hotel. He introduced them. Kumar had a special talent for drawing people to himself. His friends were all equally convinced that he cared deeply for them. Kumar personally delivered a season ticket to the cricket match between the services team and India to Choudhury.

'You won't get this opportunity often. Go, enjoy yourself.'

True. For Choudhury that was the only match where he watched famous players. Hassett and Miller of Australia. The Indian team had Merchant, Hazare, Amarnath, Mustaque, etc.... In fact, all the famous players of the day. Conversations about cricket even now reminded Choudhury about the match. How vivid was the picture of Mustaque Ali sprinting forward to bat.

Kumar became instantly informal with Choudhury and teased him about this village ways. He used to laugh, 'If you murdered someone and immediately wrapped yourself in this *endi* shawl, nobody would believe that you had committed this crime ...even if they have witnessed it with their own eyes!'

Kumar had to leave the hostel. It was due to an incident. Most of what Choudhury had heard was hearsay. He could not vouch for it. Kumar and a fellow named Ananta apparently created drunken mayhem in a residence near the hostel. It was about forty years later that Choudhury would meet Nibaran Kumar again.

After retirement Choudhury built a small house in the corner of the city. It almost did not happen. Dibakar Das and Gajanan Roy were in the process of building their homes in that area. They put pressure on Choudhury to buy a plot of land near them and help him get everything together to start on his house. Without their encouragement and enthusiasm, Choudhury would never have built his home.

One fine day, Nibaran Kumar appeared at Choudhury's doorstep. He was stone drunk. He rocked gently on his feet. His apparel consisted of a pair of grubby pants and a crumpled orange Kurta. A headful of white hair. Choudhury asked suspiciously, 'What do you want?'

Not bothering to reply, the man stared unblinkingly at Choudhury. Choudhury felt uncomfortable and started to get annoyed. Suddenly the man laughed maniacally.

'Country bumpkin, am I right?'

Some old chips of the bygone Calcutta days came back to Choudhury's house.

'Kumar Sahib! Come in, come in, come in!'

He disguised his dismay at what had become of his old friend. His efforts not to offend Kumar made him almost inarticulate.

Later Dibakar Das explained to Choudhury. The property on which they had all built their homes had once belonged to Kumar's family. Kumar had lost it all because of his drinking habit.

'We bought the land from Naba Borah. How did he come by it? He advanced two thousand rupees to get it under his control.'

They did not affect Choudhury's feelings for Kumar a bit. Choudhury liked him. Kumar blamed neither himself nor anyone else. He showed no regrets or repentance. His losses did not disturb him unduly. He had accepted his situation.

'Brother, it's fate. What can anyone do?'

'What logic! You let drinking habit ruin you and blame fate?'

'My drinking was fated. It was destined that I would drink and lose everything. That's exactly what I did.'

There is no sense in arguing with such a man. Kumar used to turn up unannounced in Choudhury's house. Sometimes, he would be drunk and sometimes sober. He teased Choudhury.

'Would you like a swig? Should I bring some?'

'Absolutely not!'

'To think that you will die without tasting this heavenly brew! I'll bring the real stuff, nothing adulterated.

'No need.'

Kumar enjoyed Choudhury's discomfiture.

'You don't have to worry. People see me staggering even when I walk straight. If you swig some and lose your balance people would say that you tripped.'

That day too Kumar needled Choudhury.

'How about it? I have some good stuff here.'

'Indeed. That's the only thing left for me in my old age.'

Immediately Kumar became serious.

'Why do you talk about old age?' He got agitated. He whispered into Choudhury's ear even though there was not another soul in the house, 'It was two days before I went off to Calcutta for the college. My father was about sixty years old at the time. The girl who worked in our house was, say, thirteen or fourteen. A charming girl. There was always a smile on her face. My father raped her that day. She bled so much that Dr. Ghose, my father's friend, had to be summoned.'

Kumar did not return for a while. Suddenly, he appeared one evening. He called to Choudhury from the street.

'Hey country bumpkin!'

Choudhury emerged.

'Come, come.'

He kept shouting from that distance.

'Want a swig? I have some good stuff.'

'Come into the house.'

'Why should I? You have no appetite for life.'

'Be careful. You could be knocked down by a car.'

Kumar steadied himself.

'Who can knock me down? I've been drinking for fifty years. Let's see how long you live. I'll be at your funeral. Write this down. We'll compare notes later.' It's never a good idea for an artist to imitate. The original work of a patient but less talented artist is better appreciated by the knowledgeable public than the blind imitation of a great master. To imitate is to acknowledge one's shortcomings. It also forces others to make unfair comparisons. A writer from West Bengal once told Bhudev Choudhury, 'During Rabindra Thakur's days, many imitated his poetry. Some were pretty good. But no one became as famous as the master. However, Nazrul Islam writing his poetry in an original style is still well known today.'

Bhudev Choudhury's daughter often coaxed him, 'Why don't you write? You while away your time. Why don't you write your authobiography?'

'Ridiculous. It's not that easy.'

'Why? You've written short stories before. Very good stories.'

'Why would you consider them anything else but good?'

'I'm serious. Start writing. If nothing else, it would remain as a chronicle of your time.'

'I'm too old to do that.'

'Nonsense! Didn't Bertrand Russell write his autobiography when he was ninety?'

Comparison between Bertrand Russell and Bhudev Choudhury! In such a moment Choudhury feels like muttering a popular obscenity. He couldn't do that in front of his daughter, though. He kept quiet.

'You have, Russell's autography. Take a look at it. How he wrote it.'

'Is imitation that easy? Russell is so great that he can talk easily about his failings and shortcomings. His great genius is not a bit affected thereby.' Choudhury had no doubt that even with his considerably lesser talents, if he had written some insipid stories, they would have been lapped up by poorly-educated young men. But what is there in his life? What could he write? An ordinary existence, neither elevated nor lowly. A faceless existence, Bhudev Choudhury had done nothing of note. He got up in the morning, drank his tea, ate his lunch, and lay down to sleep at night. This multiplied by the years of his life was the sum total. It did not even bear mentioning.

He did nothing in time. Running to catch a bus, he was always late. He married late, got a steady job late. He built his house only after retirement. Even this came about because Dibakar Das and Gajanan Roy were his childhood classmates. It was impossible to buy land in the city. This was an almost vacant lot. Gajanan and Dibakar chose to build their houses here. They practically forced Choudhury to acquire a plot there. Now the place had grown into a small city. People called it Santinagar.

Ranu was Choudhury's elder daughter, Anita was the younger one. He didn't need a big house. Ranu married Ramesh Barua, a well-known doctor in the same city. The other son-in-law was Ramen Kakati, an engineer, who was also living in Guwahati. Anita, an M A in English, taught in a local college.

The two daughters were opposite in temperament. Ranu had little interest in academics. She was content with her B A degree. Reserved and quiet, she ran the house efficiently. Her quiet instructions were rarely ignored by anyone in the household. Even Choudhury felt slightly intimidated by her. He controlled his smoking in her presence. The few pounds she gained after her marriage seemed to add to her stature.

Anita had always been the fickle one. Her mother had to put her schoolbooks together, she couldn't make a cup of tea without breaking a saucer or setting her clothes on fire. Angrily, her mother told her to stay from household chores. She feared for her plight after she got married. After her mother's death, Ranu took over the day-to-day duties of the house.

Anita did not change. When she arrived in the house now, she first of all berated the household help for sloppy housekeeping. Pointing to cobwebs and dust, she got to work herself. She removed the pile of papers from Choudhury's desk and put them on the floor. As soon as she lost interest in cleaning up, Choudhury replaced the pile on his desk.

Choudhury's house was still unfinished. Iron rods pointed up to the sky like ghostly fingers. Choudhury listened to people who told him he should build a three-storeyed house. Why did he listen? He wondered in amusement.

Maybe he should write an autobiography. It did not necessarily mean that it would be published. Not an autobiography exactly. It would be about settling down alone in an entirely new environment. Choudhury had never thought that he would retire anywhere else but in his ancestral home.

First it was Dibakar Das, Gajanan Roy, and Bhudev Choudhury who settled in this wide open lot. They were the pioneers. Many more followed. Most of them were retired people. They seemed attracted to the spaciousness and the quiet of the area. Ratikanta Kalita, Robin Saharia, Sarat Lahkar, And Sadananda Hazarika. Choudhury opposite neighbour was Madan Das. He had rented the house from a professor at Ayurvedic College. The place now looked like a small city. People called it Santinagar.

Life after retirement is strange. It is publicly announced that a man is no longer useful to society. As a young man with an M.A. degree and no job, he had spent hours uselessly in idle gossip. But there was never a thought that he was dispensable as far as society was concerned. A spent battery is useless. That is the curse of working life.

About two years before his retirement, a feeling of lethargy took hold of him. Salary increases, promotions, these things ceased to be of interest. Financially there was nothing to look forward to. This was the beginning of the end. If one could find something to engage the mind, the remaining years of one's life might be bearable. Gajanan Roy, Ratikanta Kalita, Robin Saharia – each had found an interest that kept them busy around the clock. Bhudev Choudhury remembered

retired judge Jiten Sarma. They both were on the same committee once. Choudhury recalled how uncomfortable he had felt at the absurd importance Sarma attached to every detail of the procedure.

Why not? What's wrong with attempting to write a chronicle of one's life? It did not necessarily have to be published as a book. At least it would keep him busy. Choudhury expected to live for a little while longer. He liked to think that he had to play a role in the cosmic game plan. This was perhaps true. No, no. It had to be true. He was no machine to break and become useless. Sometimes he seemed to get an inkling of the truth. But he could not be sure. Was it reality or wishful thinking? His wife was dead. Was that the end? Was there no trace of her in the *finite* world? He was not talking about reincarnation. Nor was he talking about heaven or hell after death. He wanted to believe with all his heart that death was not the end of everything. The ups and downs, failures and successes of a lifetime became difficult to explain without that belief. How meaningless the task of accounting for our gains and losses! There is danger in indulging in such thoughts. Choudhury shook himself awake from his reverie and walked outside to calm himself down.

Ratikanta Kalita was coming from the opposite direction in a hurry. 'Where are you going, Kalita?'

'I can't find my white weanling. That old man from the village must have taken it away along with his herd. He is a villain of the piece.'

'Have you asked around in the village?'

'I'm going to look up Phani. He may be able to give me some information.'

(4)

It's impossible to just sit around. How many books can you read? Killing time became Bhudev Choudhury's greatest challenge after retirement. There was a problem with visiting people, too. Not everyone was unemployed like him. He got the distinct impression that he was not always welcome.

Ratikanta Kalita, however, had no problem staying busy after retirement. He never sat idle. Looking after chickens, ducks, etc. all day became his chief occupation. Besides, he had a herd of cows. It was not a matter of joke to look after the cows and milk them. They wandered off sometimes, and Kalita scoured the neighborhood looking for them.

He lad to face irate neighbours when his cows trampled their gardens tended with care. That was not surprising.

It was the black cow that created the nasty problems. She had the knack of getting past closed gates. She evaded capture with ease. As she scampered away she still managed to get a bite out of a next shrub on her path. People complained loudly and excitedly to Ratikanta. He was thought to be as bad as his cow. If he could not handle them he should not keep them.

When he first started working, Bhudev Choudhury's wife said, 'Why don't we get a cow? We'd get fresh, pure milk. Buddha Prasad's milk is getting worse day by day. I don't know where he gets the water to pour into it. Even our tea looks horribly discoloured. It's embarrassing in front of guests.'

'Wait a minute. Who will look after it?'

'Biren is there. He wants a cow, too.'

'If he leaves suddenly? The servant is not reliable. He can't help going home every month. Let's forget him.'

'Couldn't you manage it yourself couple of days in dire need?'

'Absolutely not. I can't drive home a cow that strays snapping her tether?'

'Everybody has done that.'

'Let them do. That's no reason for me to follow others. I don't like people scolding me.'

'Don't make such a big deal. I was only making a suggestion.'

'Well, don't.'

Choudhury often met Ratikanta Kalita on many an evening.

'Where to?'

'Don't ask. Can't find my cow. She is never this late. She usually arrives before dark. I wonder where she is?'

Wars, revolutions, natural disasters. Ratikanta was oblivious to them.

'Where are you going, Kalita?'

'To look for old man Bhonda.'

'Why?'

'My black one's throat is swollen. She can't eat. She can't stand up.'

'Why don't you get a vet?'

'No use. The same thing happened to one of my calves. I spent Rs. 50 on a vet. The calf died.'

Ratikanta Kalita was always busy. It gave him as well as his family the peace of mind. His family was quite well off. He retired as a deputy director of instructions. His eldest son was a lawyer. Relatives often asked his son, 'Why don't you stop that old man from chasing his cows down the street? Aren't you worried about what people say?'

'Who cares? Do you know how old my father is? He is over seventy. He stays healthy because he busies himself with these cows. Keep him sitting in the house for two days – he'll die. It would be much cheaper to buy milk. But every morning when father comes with his bucket of fresh milk, his face mirrors the joy of creation.'

Of late a thought was nagging Bhudev Choudhury. What had he accomplished in his life? What had he created? A hoard of coins, a line of poetry? A man in the middle. A middleman of learning – a carrier of knowledge. Was he better than Ratikanta? Abruptly Bhudev Choudhury suppressed these unsettling thoughts.

(5)

Robin Saharia was also always busy. He worked all his life for Tata. His two sons were engineers and his daughter was also married to an engineer. All of them had settled in America and were prospering. Saharia and his wife lived with several dogs for company.

Saharia often met Bhudev Choudhury. 'Why don't you come to my house? We can sit and talk.'

Not possible. Saharia did not have time to talk. He was too busy with his dogs. Restraining them, remonstrating with them took all his time. He could not sit still for a minute. Choudhury kept his distance. He did not care for dogs. He had always been afraid of them. The thought of fourteen rabies injections terrified him. His nephew was given those injections on his stomach once. It was not a pretty sight. Hardened bumps covered his belly.

He had no objection to visiting Saharia in his house, but the dogs kept him away. The first time he had gone, a small hairy dog stared steadily at him. He squirmed. Sensing his discomfiture, the dog tried to leap onto his lap. Terrified, Choudhury jumped ready to climb up one of the columns holding up the terrace. Impossible. The feat of climbing up an areca nut tree as a child was hard to repeat at his age. Saharia, meanwhile, tried to reassure him.

'Don't be afraid. He is harmless. He wants to play. Come down before you fall and hurt yourself.'

Only when Saharia held onto the dog firmly was Choudhury able to breathe easily.

He avoided going back as far as possible. It seemed to him the dogs enjoyed teasing him. He stayed alert to his tricks even while he sat talking to Saharia. There was no saying what they would do. Suddenly one would emerge from behind the sofa, place his paw on his lap and reach up to lick his face. He would freeze as if turned into stone.

Moreover, Saharia really had no time to sit and chat. While calling off one dog, he would be pulling another away. A third would run after a goat on the street. He had to be dragged back. Another would pull a tablecloth to the floor, along with the teacups and the ashtray. Sitting still even for a moment was out of question. If yelling and screaming failed, Saharia's wife approached the dogs, stick in hand. Through all this Saharia insisted on Choudhury's staying seated. 'Why do you want to leave? Sit down, sit down.'

He would be rushing to the veranda gate at the same time he was asking Choudhury to stay seated. The click of the gate would send the entire pack of dogs rushing out. Saharia would frantically try to rein them in.

Bhudev Choudhury always felt nervous about dogs. Dogs seemed to sense this and made him their target. When he thought about his encounter with his brother-in-law's big Alsatian, he still shook with fear. He had avoided visiting his brother-in-law because of that dog. He was in Dibrugarh for a meeting. He stayed at the Circuit House. His brother-in-law heard about it and took him to his house almost by force. A tickling sensation on his face woke him the next morning. He struggled out of sleep and then his heart almost stopped beating. The Alsatian had his front paws on the bed and was slobbering all over his face with his huge tongue. He lay there as if he were made of stone, afraid to breathe. Luckily, the mistress of the house hurried in and rescued him.

While Choudhury was a college student, they had a dog in their house. He strayed into their house one day and stayed back. The dog was just a mongrel but he had

a distinctive attitude and demeanour. Small things did not bother him. He sat on the verandah and stared into the distance all day long. He was oblivious to everything around him. By day he left everyone alone. A strange person coming to the house would merely get a look from him. A look was enough to congeal the blood in his heart! An intruder in the night would quickly be sent off with loud barks.

The train was running late, while Choudhury was once coming back home during Pooja Holidays. When he reached, it was about one o'clock on the night. The house was surrounded by a wall. The gate was locked. Choudhury called out loudly. He couldn't awaken anybody. He decided to clamber over the gate. He heard Bhulu bark and run towards him.

'It's me, it's me!'

His voice perhaps trembled a bit. Bhulu did not seem to recognize him. He leaped to attack and Choudhury braced himself and closed his eyes. Hearing a whimper, he opened his eyes. The ferocious Bhulu of a second ago lay prostrate at his feet in abject contrition. The dog recognized him. The sight of this new Bhulu was almost heart rending Choudhury fought back his tears.

'Get up, get up. That's enough.'

He stooped down and started to stroke the dog on the back. His tail began to wag excitedly. This was the only time in his life he felt close to a dog.

(6)

Though not officially a city, Santinagar could pass for one. Dibakar Das and Gajanan Roy were the first two brave souls to build their homes and settle in Santinagar. Before long, the entire area filled up. Encouraged by Das and Roy, Bhudev Choudhury came to retire there. Sarat Lahkar too was one of the first settlers. He always looked sad and preoccupied, and seemed reluctant to associate with anyone.

Sarat Lakhar's eldest son was not completely unconscious. He recognized people, at least he recognized Lahkar. As soon as his father approached, he clamoured for his attention. A one-year child resided in a thirty-year old body. After even a brief absence, Lahkar had to hold him on his lap and cuddle him like a baby. Congenitally handicapped, he could not sit up, let alone walk. He looked like a malformed five-year-old boy. He spent his days and nights in a crib so that he would not fall from. Stunted as he was in mind and body, he had still sprouted a beard and moustache. A rather frightening sight, especially for cry-babies when they saw him. Hence Lahkar tried to keep him out of sight. A monstrous look.

Before her death Lahkar's wife had looked after her crippled son all these years. She fed him, cleaned up his mess, dressed and undressed him. No one volunteered to help her. Everyone felt a keen revulsion towards this deformed human.

The rest of their children were without blemish. His son Sudhangshu had moved out and rented another house. His wife Radhika could not reconcile herself to living with her in-laws. She entered his room one day and saw him fondling his penis. As she watched in horror and repulsion, the organ got erected and stiffened. She dashed out of the room yelling in horror. Since then she had had nauseating feeling all the time.

Sarat Lahkar had no peace of mind. What would happen to this son of his after Lahkar's death? He was getting older and weaker. His body had started to give in. What would happen to this unfortunate creature when he died? He wished for his son's death while he, the father, was still able to move around. He realized how shocking these thoughts were. The young man so obviously yearned to be held by him, to be shown affection. It was getting more difficult to pick him up. He did so anyway.

Sarat Lahkar had no peace of mind. Bhudev Choudhury was his neighbour. When things became unbearable he went over.

'Choudhury, her Choudhury.'

'Come in.'

Lahkar sat down and asked, 'What do you think of the Middle East situation? Do you think it can lead to a third world war?'

He had no interest in the Middle East. He did not listen to Choudhury's reply. His mind had its own worries. As Choudhury talked, he suddenly interjected, 'I read an article in *the Reader's Digest* today about mercy killing. What are your views?'

In the midst of finding a political solution to the Middle East situation, Choudhury halted abruptly when he heard Lahkar's question.

'Hard to say.'

'It surely is. Does anyone have a right to destroy a human life? Is a life in which you can walk around normally more valuable? Choudhury kept quiet. A neighbour though he was, he had no idea of the burden Lahkar was carrying about. No one could lessen his load. He was completely alone.

Back home Kanu again clamoured for his father's attention. Lahkar picked him up and felt a pull in his back. Surely it was getting more difficult every day. His son went to sleep in his arms, content for now. He put him back in his crib and straightened his stiff back.

(7)

Anita had more than once asked Bhudev Choudhury to begin writing his autobiography. What was there to write? Writing about one's life meant delving into your memory. Thinking to jot down a few things, he looked around for a clean sheet of paper among the pile on his desk. He couldn't find one. Abandoning his search, he went and sat down on one of the cane chairs outside on the verandah.

If the bookstore was closed for some reason, Dibakar Das came and joined him on the verandah sometimes. Not much was usually said. Jagen brought them cups of tea, though he was not told to. It was not impossible to exchange thoughts and feelings without saying much. Both sat there for quite a while, quietly. Das would eventually get up and head towards home. Sometimes he excused himself, at other times he left without a word. That day, Choudhury accompanied Das to the gate and watched him walk away. Das's head was down, his steps, slow. A decidedly quiet and subdued air about him. He was not like that before. He used to be a dynamic, energetic, young man. Bhudev Choudhury had felt lost soon after he had arrived in Calcutta. The crowds, the level of activity, the chaos seemed to make him helpless. No, it would not work. He could not do it. He could never find

his way around here.

Dibakar Das, Aghar, and Satyen took it upon themselves to teach Choudhury to survive in Calcutta. Besides showing him how to jump off a moving train, how to board the right bus, they took him for sightseeing. TheVictoria Memorial, Lake, Zoo, Belur Math. Das ticked them off. 'Have we left off anything? What else can people ask about?'

He was looking ahead to Choudury's visit home during Pooja Hoidays. People might ask him about Calcutta. Suddenly he slapped his forehead in dismay. 'We've left out the main thing! Calcutta High Court!'

Dibakar Das had never been able to recover from the hurt received then. Since then he has been in a perpetual state of shock and confusion.

Choudhury by then had moved away to a Missionary Hostel. World War II was drawing to a close. Independence for India did not seem impossible. Such great happenings did not occupy one's thoughts for very long. Day-to-day life went on. The outcome of Cripp's mission seemed less momentous than India's cricket match with Australia.

Occasionally, though, sparks flew. Protests were lodged against decisions made against INA officials. Meetings were held, protest marches were taken out.

People succumbed to police bullets. Excitement was running high for a few days. Then peace returned again. These events were rare. Life continued as usual. Movies, gossip, shopping, classes, work-regular day living. Cripp's Mission and the New Revolution were secondary happenings. They assumed importance occasionally but the excitement was quickly *quelled.*

Choudhury played chess with the hostel supervisor. He skipped classes to watch a matinee at the Globe Cinema. A peaceful, slow moving life. Like an initially undetected whiff of deadly smoke that mushrooms into a dark cloud, seemingly inconsequential events added up to create dark dangerous tunes in Calcutta. A man was pushing his load in a cart, another was selling incense by the wayside, still another was enjoying a leisurely cup of tea in a restaurant. Suddenly, it seemed people fell upon each other with unbridled fury like blood-thirsty savages.

The vicious communal riot in Calcutta left an indelible scar on the pages of the country's history. It was proof of the unsteady foundation on which our civilization rests. One tremor and the whole structure lies in ruins. Like ghosts in the might a myriad dark shadows emerged from the dark entrails of the earth. As slithery as snakes but far more venomous.

Even now Bhudev Choudhury shivers when he remembers those days. That was not the everyday world of one's experience. The familiar world disappeared. It seemed the fires of the funeral pier took over the entire city. A land of the dead over which the victorious devil ruled. One side said ' Allah ho Akbar,' the other, 'Bande Mataram.' Beautiful historical chants distorted by this shameless misuse.

In the hostel Choudhury began to walk around like a mechanical doll, helpless and confused, eyes wide with fear. The pressure of fear seemed to squeeze the breath out of his body. The pain of unexpressed love, the burden of suppressed tears permeated the hostel.

Time somehow passed during the day. At night it seemed to stand still. The world seemed to rein time in. Tall fences surrounded the hostel. Nobody dared to move out of the compound. After a simple evening meal doors were locked and everyone headed to the rooftop. There were stacks of bricks all around. Under Father William's supervision, steps in front of the hostel had been dismantled to build up the stacks.

No one had any inkling of the trouble brewing at first. The activities of Vasudev Sweeper changed all that. Around four in the afternoon he entered the hostel compound holding on to a whiskey bottle under each arm. Bumping into Choudhury, he started to laugh, as if already a little drunk.

'Where did you get those?' Choudhury asked.

'Park street shops are being looted,' said Vasudev in an off-hand manner, 'People are destroying items indiscriminately. You remember the big electronics store? All the radios are out on the streets. All the expensive liquor in Khubchand Sohrab's store is spilt all over the place. I felt sad. I picked up two bottles.'

'You drank some, too?'

'Not at all.'

Vasudev chuckled again. He was elated. Putting the two bottles in his shack, he hurried off again. Moments later, all hell broke loose. People ran down the street, looking behind as they ran. Vasudev bolted back. 'Ai baap!'

'What happened!'

'The troops are out. They are shooting people.'

That situation had so deteriorated that Choudhury could barely comprehend. Father Williams appeared suddenly walking briskly to the hostel. He advised all students to stay indoors. He even forbade moving around in the hostel itself. The hostel gates were firmly locked. Everyone realized that night how terrible the situation was. Hellish cries of victory clashed with wails of fear. 'Allah ho Akbar!' 'Bande Mataram!' They listened to the sounds but they could not see much. Furore flared up in pockets of sensitive areas and died down in the distance. Nothing could be seen clearly. Swirls of rising smoke gave little clue as to the exact location. Muted sounds of distress was shrouded under a hazy sky. From the hostel roof the students looked on helpless and frightened.

Fear gnawed their hearts. It became impossible to bear as the events continued day after day. If the hostel was going to be attacked, they wanted it to happen and have the stalemate decided one way or another.

Nights passed in terror. With daylight the feeling of fear seemed to ease. If an attack came during the day faces would be clearly seen with their facial expressions and the look in their eyes.

On the third night a truck carrying a wild and screaming mob came to stop before the hostel gates. Father Williams in his cassock hurried to the front. He sent word to Malik Sahib next door. Malik Sahib was an influential man in the neighborhood. His sober demeanour commanded respect. He approached the truck and swore to the crowd that the hostel was exclusively for Christian students. The truck slowly drove away.

Father Williams and Malik Sahib. One a Christian, the other a Muslim. In this section of the city where Muslims predominated, these two saintly individuals in the face of blind hatred protected a group of Hindu students.

In the midst of chaos Mialik Sahib managed to procure food for this fairly large group of young men.

Foolishness. What else could it be? What was the necessity of getting involved in such a dangerous situation? Sheer force of habit? It was hard to come up with any other reason. Choudhury remembered all of this with sadness and gratitude.

Just before nightfall there was a huge commotion in front of the hostel. Two people were stabbed. During these times Father Williams did not leave the hostel. He rushed out. Alarmed, students tried to peer out from behind the boys. It was as if a jolt of lightning hit Choudhury.

'Aghar, Dibakar!'

They were being carried into the premises. Aghar was dead. Dibakar's wound was less grievous.

'What are you doing here?' cried Choudhury half accusingly.

'Aghar said, 'Bhudev is in a very bad part of the town. I wonder how he is? We should find out. Maybe we should bring him out of there,' said Dibakar despairingly.



Rani Dutta Choudhury: An M.A. in English from Gauhati University, Ms. Choudhury has translated many of Sheelabhadra's short stories, which were published in different journals and magazines including Indian Literature published by Sahitya Akademi. A retired teacher, she now lives in an USA.

A few days later under heavily armed police escort, the students were led out of the hostel. Choudhury along with some others were taken to the Sealdah Station. The streets were strewn with dead bodies – too many to dispose of fast enough. Lime glistened on the corpses that gave off a horrible stench. Nobody said a word on the way to the station. There was no need.

It is said that a cow who escapes a house fire is scared at the sight of a red-tinged cloud. Choudhury's heart trembles to its core when he hears about communal fighting, a shameless expression of man's hidden propensity for hatred. The senseless slaughter of old men, women, and children. Helplessness and physical weakness become the reason for the attack. Humankind took neon's to crush this ugly monster. It takes just a moment for it to rear its ugly head again. It's hard to escape its influence. It does not discriminate between the educated and the illiterate. The rules for wrongdoing change. It is not always wrong to kill. It's only wrong if the other side kills someone in your group. There are no tears shed for the thousands slaughtered on the opposing side. It is barely noticed. The Bible's message is distorted. Thou shall not kill. This applies only to your particular side.

When he remembers these days, Bhudev still shudders in horror.❑

(The original Assamese novel is Gadhuli)

(to be continued)



Homen Borgohai

A truly great writer, Homen Borgohain enjoys enviable reputation in differ branches of Assamese literatu

Homen Borgohain

matsyagandha

(tale of a fishwife)

***Translated by* Nirendra Nath Thakuria**

Two men forded the river and walked a short distance. As soon as they stepped onto the village road, a couple of mongrels, the self-appointed guards of the village, made an awful racket by barking at them. People were toasting themselves around a fire inside their home said to themselves, "Surely people from the south bank. They have come somewhere to visit their kinsfolk."

Not giving a damn to the chase and barking of the dogs, one of the men said, "Be off! Mongrels are worth for nothing but barking. O *Salpati* (brother-in-law), what type of village is this? It is still dusk. Yet the road wears a deserted look. It may be winter. But why should the young and old huddle together inside their houses barring the doors on the evening?

The other man could not peer through the darkness and stepped in a raw cowpat. He almost slipped. Suddenly he got angry with the entire village. "These villages of the north bank are not like ours of the south bank," said he. Wiping clean his feet on the patch of roadside wild arums soaked in dew he added, "The village-folk are still very unclean and uncivilized. They are very lazy too. You have seen it: it's still twilight; there is none on the road. Hardly the sun sets, when male and female, young and old alike, huddle together around the fireplace. Wait a minute, *Salpati*. Let me roll a cigarette. My lips are shivering with cold."

Luckily it was there where they halted to roll a cigarette that a heap of paddy straw was smouldering at the entrance of a family. The village-folk keep burning paddy straw in this manner to get lye for washing their clothes with in the next morning. The man who proposed to roll a cigarette felt the warmth of the fire in the feet and almost exclaimed with delight, "How lucky, oh *Salpati*! Let us sit here on hunches and smoke the cigarette till the fire goes out. The fire of paddy straw doesn't take long to go out."

And not waiting for the companion's okay he sat on his hunches. The other person had to follow suit. While smoking the cigarette one of them looked around in the darkness and said, "*Salpati*, I can't guess anything in the darkness. Have we crossed the Mohghuli village? What village is this?"

—poetry, prose, short story, novel, essay and journalistic writings. One of he foremost Assamese novelists, Borgohain is acclaimed for his daring themes and his unique prose style—powerful and eloquent. His masterpiece Pitaputra is a saga of two generations in rural Assam during a period of rapid changes. Recipient of the Assam Valley Literary Award,

The other person replied, "You have asked the wrong person, *Salpati.* Have you forgotten I have come to the north bank for the first time? Rise, rise to your feet. People will be fast asleep having their supper when we reach our destination. We'll have to go hungry, and toss and tumble in bed."

They rose to their feet and resumed their journey. It was a night of the waning moon. On either side of the road there were clumps of bamboos, bananas, areca nuts, *keseru (silkworm tree)*, and other trees. The shadows of the trees thickened the darkness of the night. The men groped their way somehow by the starlight dimmed by mist. Actually, they didn't expect to be so much late on the night. If they could catch the first ferry, they would reach their destination before sunset. One of the tyres of the Dishangmukh-bound bus was punctured on the way resulting in the loss of about one hour. They had to wait hours for the second trip yawning at the Dishangmukh river crossing.

They began to walk in silence for some time. All of a sudden they heard the sizzling of fish frying in the kitchen of a house on the road. The next moment the smell of frying fish hit the nostrils of the passers-by. Immediately they felt the pangs of hunger and their mouths started watering. One of them swallowed hard and said, "O *Salpati,* when will we reach the home of your new kinsfolk? I'm ravenously hungry?

The other person just opened his mouth to say something. Suddenly his mouth got shut. He sniffed and moments later clearing his throat he spat and exclaimed with delight, "We're nearing, *Salpati.* It is not far from here. Hardly a mile."

Surprised, the other person asked, "Since when have you been able to guess the distance by smelling?"

The first one loudly spat for the second time and said, "We've reached the *Dom* village. It is a distance of just one mile between the *Dom* village and the *Lahan* village we are heading for."

*Borgohain was elected President of Asom Sahitya Sabha. This particular novel– **Matsyagandha** captures the life story of the fisherfolk of Assam before Independence – their humiliation, their untold sufferings and unfulfilled aspirations.*

The other one said, "But how have you recognized this as a Dom village in the pitch darkness?"

"What do you say, *Salpati*? It can be identified as a Dom village by its smell. Haven't you noticed how the wind has become heavy with the smell of roasted fish? Perhaps the entire village went fishing to some beel today. There are countless rivers and beels in this area of the north bank. And the rivers and beels abound with fishes also. I have seen this in the home of my brother-in-law. When the villagers go out for communal fishing, each of them gets back home with a haul of more than a hundred of fresh water fishes such as *ari, gagal, sol, barali,* etc. We the Ahoms–Kacharis have this advantage — whatever can be eaten fresh is eaten. And the rest is dried up and preserved for six months to one year. The other Hindus are at a great disadvantage. They have no option but to dump the excess fish around the roots of the betel nut plants as manure. Maybe, the Doms have had a large haul of fish today. That's why the entire village is reeking of the

roasted fish. So long you've passed through the Kari village and the Mohghuli village. Did you get this smell of roasted fish then? People of those villages_also eat roasted fish; I don't say they don't. But in those villages you will get the smell of fried fish with the roasted one. You will get the smell of green vegetables and pulses, turmeric and condiments also. But you will get none of them in the Dom village. Perhaps they do not know the use of edible oil at all. You keep going, and where the smell of roasted fish is no longer hanging, you see, I'll prove that the Dom village we are..."

The man could not finish the sentence. Shattering the pitch darkness of the way side a terrible yell like the bang on a cracked bell-metal gong startled them both so much that they held their breath for moments. That ghastly voice begin to yell, "Oy snot-lickers, oy maggoty-mouthed, henpecked underlings! Who do you call 'Doms'? I will thrash your faces with a frayed *mekhela* (Assamese skirt of ankle length). Don't you know this virago? Hey Soneswar, hey Kalimon, you're snoring under your wives' mekhelas, and those cursed snot-licking curs have called you all 'Doms' at your own home. Haven't you heard them? If you are really men, get up, catch and bring the snot-lickers, goners to me. I will thrash their faces with a mekhela..."

The wayfarers were dumbfounded. It was a strange place. What if a gang of youths would accost them and some beat them up! There would be no way but to endure the insult in silence. It would be a great sin if they, beaten up by outcastes, won't go through the purification rituals after their return to the village. All in all, they were in real trouble. They did not open their mouth but began to pick their way as fast as they could. They would feel save only if they could manage to pass through the village.

(One)

Unable to get any sleep, Menaka was tossing in her bed made of paddy straw. She had to go hungry that night. The leftover rice of the midday meal was not enough for her husband and two sons. That she hadn't had her meal was not the main cause of her wakefulness. Why a single meal? She could snore comfortably without having two or three meals. She was quite used to it. But today the main cause of her sleeplessness was that she could not anyhow manage the evening pellet of opium. If she could not smoke opium in the evening, she could not sleep the whole night. And she won't let her neighbours sleep easily.

As she had nothing to do, Menaka went to bed at dusk. Gauging her mood today, her husband Purna sensed the danger. So he had a few mouthfuls of the leftover water rice with salt and chilli at dusk and made off to the Namghar. At twilight some old men of the village gathered at the Namghar and sang devotional songs. Purna attended the Namghar if he had free time or Menaka was in a terrible mood. Lying in the bed Menaka hoped that Purna would also come to sleep, and then she would pick up a quarrel with him give him an earful only to rid herself of the

anger caused by the opium dose she couldn't smoke. Menaka needed nothing if she could give someone an earful. She would go on for hours and quite often tended to forget the agonies of life. Today also she made her mind to do so. But Purna denied her the chance. Hissing like a cobra and tossing in the bed again and again, she kept waiting for Purna's return. Right at that moment she caught the snatch of the conversation of the passers-by: " ...you see, I'll prove that the Dom village we are..."

Dom! Dom! Dom! The very word made Menaka go mad. With that word were associated countless heart-rending stories of pain and insult of her life. She was about five years only old when she first learned the word 'Dom'. One day her mother had to go to a family of the Mohghuli village to ask for an advance of some measure of rice in exchange of fish in a future deal. She took Menaka with her, as there was none to look after the child. The morning sun was about to blaze. Just then they arrived at the clay courtyard of the family. The housewife of the family was spreading boiled paddy with a wooden rake to dry. At the sight of it, Memeri, mother of Menaka, got alert at a distance and stood under the shade of the granary at some distance from the courtyard. But before she could caution Menaka, the girl trotted across the courtyard and stood very close to the woman spreading paddy. At the footfalls the housewife lifted her eyes. She saw Menaka but could not make out anything first. Next moment her eye fell on Menaka's mother. She flew into a rage, gave a hard slap on Menaka's cheek and began to yell, "Tsh! tsh! spoiled! A basketful of paddy is spoiled. Oy shrew, Memeri! Your daughter is a child, so she knows nothing. But you old bag! Why could you not prevent her? Couldn't hold her? Now you see, a basketful of nice *Sol pona* paddy is wasted."

Menaka was stunned by the unexpected slap on the face. She could not even imagine how she offended the housewife. She burst into sobs and sniffs, and went to her mother. She held her mother's waist with her emaciated right hand and tried hard to make out the conversation between her mother and the housewife.

In a feeble voice Memeri said, "Mistress, this innocent little girl just stood near the paddy unknowingly. Should you slap her so hard for that offence? Although we belong to the low caste, we too are human beings, not cats and dogs. Oh yeah, Mistress, whether these things are really written in your sastras or not only God knows!"

Memeri began to wipe away the tears rolling down her cheeks with the end of her soiled frayed *anchal*.

The housewife had been upset for something since morning. On top of it when a woman of low caste now answered her back, it made her blood boil. She made a dash towards Memeri, her eyes blazing, and thundered, "Oh, what did you say? What did you say, you Dom? How dare you answer me back? The daughter of Dom has spoiled a bushel of paddy by casting her shadow on it. Still I have to keep silent? Do not provoke this lady; you have to face the music. Be off, before things take a turn for the worse." She then turned her back to Memeri and facing the house she began to yell at somebody, "O Ponaram, Ponaram. The daughter of Dom has spoiled a bushel of paddy. It will be fodder for your drafts bullocks."

Then and there Memeri gave up the hope of getting paddy, and holding her daughter

by the hand she began to walk home. No fire had been lit in their hearth since last evening. They would have to go hungry this noon also if they could not manage some amount of paddy or rice. But Memeri was so shattered that she felt it better to starve than to beg rice from any family. Hot tears brimmed over and fell on her cheeks again and again when the scene of the innocent little girl being slapped hard on the face for no offence came to her mind. Walking some distance Menaka said to her, "Mother, the woman said she would throw away the paddy. What did I really do there?

Memeri thought that it was high time to teach her. Otherwise there would no certainty that she won't be slapped or kicked somewhere else. She said to her daughter, "We are Doms, you see. God has created us as Doms because of some sins in our previous life. If the shadow of a Dom falls on the boiled paddy dried in the clay courtyard of a Hindu family, the paddy turns impure. And by chance..."

Memeri wanted to say something but a fresh cry welling up choked her voice and she fell silent.

Although her mother did not say more, later Menaka learnt from her personal experience that not only boiled paddy turned impure by the touch of a Dom's shadow but also all food touched by a Dom. The Doms are not allowed to enter the house of a Hindu. If a Dom intensely thirsty begged water from a Hindu family, he would be given water on an arum leave that too he had to pluck from the wayside. If by chance children of a household touched a Dom boy working as a ploughman or cowherd there, they had to take a bath immediately.

Thus throughout her life Menaka had to suffer the curse of being born a Dom. Yet whenever she heard the offensive word 'Dom' each time the memory of that sad incident stirred up, and instantly she felt the terribly hard slap stinging in her cheek.

Deprived of her opium dose, Menaka was utterly desperate. In such a situation, the snatches of the conversation between the wayfarers added fuel to flames. But they served her a purpose. She was just waiting for a pretext to pick up a quarrel with her husband just to forget the twinges caused by the deprivation of opium. But she was helpless as her husband was away. At that very moment as if God sent the wayfarers. In the mean time they might have walked a long distance. But she kept hurling a torrent of abuse at them, no matter whether they heard it or not.

(Two)

Menaka was hurling abuse for a long time and got tired. She kept silent for moments to gather her strength before resuming her abuse. Just at that moment she heard breathing and realized that Purna, her husband, taking advantage of her long spell of verbal abuse, had tiptoed quietly onto the bed and he had been asleep since then. To be sure she reached her hand out over her two sleeping sons and touched her husband. Her hand fell on the seven-day stubble on the shrivelled sunken cheeks of Purna. She immediately withdrew her hand as if it touched something very repulsive. She thundered, "Son of a knave, why don't you wear a mekhela instead of your dhoti? Aren't you ashamed of getting onto the bed like a thief?

Rather than living this life of constant suffering at the hands of a woman, why don't you drown yourself in the river Mohghuli with a grind stone around your neck?"

A thrill ran over Purna's body when his face was touched by Menaka's hand. Sometimes Menaka wanted him very close to her bosom, then she signalled him in this manner. Like in all other family affairs, Menaka took the lead in this one also. Sometimes, once in a year, if Purna wanted to take the lead, Menaka growled at him; and he lay quiet. Learning from his experience Purna won't repeat the same mistake nowadays. Whatever it might be, one of the causes of Purna's thrill at the touch of her hand was that Meneka often drew her husband to her bosom in a fit of rage. Purna thought she was going to do that. But his fond dream lasted no longer than the batting of an eyelid. Her stinging abuse dashed him from the peak of a hill to the ground far below. He tried to hold his breath and play possum.

But Menaka was not that sort who would leave it like that. The two unknown wayfarers uttered 'Doṃ' when she was really suffering the twinges caused by the deprivation of her opium dose. It evoked so many bitter memories and a burning passion for revenge in her that she could not regain her peace of mind without terribly hurting someone. She opened her mouth again, "Oy cursed henpecked underling, why are you so silent? The entire village says you are not the father of these two sons. Is it false? Only a couple of days ago when the quarrel over the boundary of land was raging, your own elder brother, the sibling from the same womb, thundered to your face, 'Hey Purna, you need not play the macho before me by brandishing your big dao. Prove it to your wife if you can. The world knows that you are not potent even to father a child in the womb of your wife.' If it had been false, won't you have beheaded him at a single stroke of your big dao? But you did nothing like that, but fled with your tail between your legs to hide your face under the mekhala of your wife. Listen! Are you listening? Prick up your ears and listen! Whatever people say is absolutely true. You are not the father of these two sons — not the father of the dead one also."

But all her efforts went up in smoke. Menaka expected that no man even a real impotent could show so much patience after such a torrent of extremely provocative abuse by a woman sleeping in the same bed. Even placid men like Purna would at least protest once. If he could do nothing, he would give his wife a full-blooded slap. It was what Menaka wanted. But he completely let her down and lay calmly asleep. Piling on her agonies, he began to snore very soon.

Menaka was at a loss and fell silent for a while. She felt a burning sensation all over her body. Livid she felt like biting off her own flesh. Anyhow she would pass the night. But how would she manage her pellet of opium in the next morning? No pots and pans are left in the house to sell or mortgage. Then, how would she manage her pellet in the next morning?

A fox howled by the outer clay plinth of the house and startled Menaka. At once two dogs began to bark. The fox dashed through the thickets into the darkness of the bamboo patch in fear of its life.

Menaka came out of the house and peed in the corner of outer the clay plinth. The main road of the village is to the north of their two-room house. To the west is the

road leading to the river, to the south and the east, the stretch of bamboo groves. It was so dark under the bamboo groves that she dared not to go there and pee. Having peed she wanted to go to the bed. Suddenly she changed her mind and sat on her hunches before the threshold. As she was unable to sleep, she felt it better to gaze at stars sitting there than to toss and tumble in bed. She felt cold, but like an obstinate person she did not give it a damn and kept sitting there vacantly looking up at the sky. Barring the dripping sounds of big dewdrops there was no sounds in the surroundings. The sky was studded with countless stars. There were so many stars that they had to jostle for a place of their own. While she was gazing at the stars, suddenly tears well up in her eyes. Many years ago she was a little girl. She never had her full meals. Although she had to go hungry, her heart was filled with fresh dreams. The starry sky, the gurgling river, the wind whistling through the leaves of trees, and tune of the cowherd's flute wafting from a distance sowed the seeds of new dreams in her heart everyday. She wanted something from her life. But she never knew what exactly she wanted. But she wanted something very nice, sweet and lovely, and she cherished a firm belief that she would achieve this even through some supernatural means. The starry sky dissolved for moments before her tearful eyes. But another sky woke up in her mind—

The sky over childhood under which she prayed, 'O Moon, give me a star.' One day she stretched out her hand to the stars, but what she really got from life?

(Three)

The Goroimari is a big Koiborta (fishermen's) village on the bank of the river Mohghuli. The villagers are poor, but they could sustain themselves by hard work. Although fishing is their main profession, they also work on a daily wage with families of the neighbouring villages. If there is any opportunity to cultivate the holm they do so by clearing some patches of the jungle and have a harvest that sustains them at least two months. They have a large haul of fish during the peak time of the summer season, but they never get the reasonable price of it. The times in which the story is set, the entire Mohghuli village was cut off from the outside world because of poor roads and the lack of transport. Most people saw a picture of a train or a bus but they never saw it with their own eyes. Baskets of fish went begging and rotted, and without transport facilities the huge amount of fish could not be supplied outside the area. There were few local customers; the peasants of the neighbouring villages hardly bought fish or barter it for paddy. They were as skilled in fishing as the fishermen. Although the area abounded with fish and the villagers were hard-working, they never got rid of wants and poverty.

Even among the poor fishermen of the Goroimari village, Duryodhan enjoyed a reputation of being comparatively well-off. This man was extremely hard-working. He was not content with a hand-to-mouth existence by fishing. He also cleared patches of the deep jungle in the holm and there he cultivated paddy, pulses and mustard that sustained him throughout the year. He had two daughters and two sons. Duryodhan became the richest man in the village by dint of sheer hard work. And as luck would have it, his two daughters also

were the most beautiful girls in the village. Beula was six years old and Menaka, four. Duryodhan was very proud of them. He had not only pride but also a small dream. Weddings hardly took place in their community or at least among the people of their community in that area. A lover took the lead in eloping with a girl who reached puberty or a pubescent girl eloped with her lover. But Duryodhan heard it on the grapevines that a couple of young men of the Koiborta community of the south bank had joined as clerks or *maharis* (overseers) after their matriculation. Naturally they wanted to marry beautiful girls. If the girls were literate, they would be all the more sought-after. As literate girls were rare in the Koiborta community, they wanted beauty to compensate for the girls' education. Young Koiborta men in service keenly felt the need of such beautiful girls to copy with the new advanced society that gave them the entry cards. Duryodhan had heard that unable to find suitable brides such young men had married outside their caste. Some were still desperately looking for beautiful girls everywhere. Duryodhan, looking at the faces of Beula and Menaka, beamed and entertained a pipe dream. Closing his eyes he had the vision of his sons-in-law – one, a junior record keeper in a court, the other, an overseers in a tea garden. Suddenly he opened his eyes in fear. How could a man stand up to such a stroke of unimaginable fortune?



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(Four)

One morning the women of the Goroimari village went to the river ghat to bring water and saw the dead body of a boy about five years old drifting down the river. They filled their pitchers, returned home wailing and immediately informed their men. They did not have to wait long to find out the root cause of the incident. Before long the news spread from mouth to mouth that cholera had broken out in the upstream villages — Satolachuk, Mirigaon, Borgaon, Gogoichuk, and Ghilaguri. About one hundred people had died within twenty-four hours. For want of both men and time, people had floated the dead bodies of little children down the river Mohghuli.

The Ghilaguri village lies beyond the vast paddy field to the east of the Goroimari village. That meant cholera would strike the Goroimari village at any moment. The memories of the devastation caused by the epidemic cholera three years ago were still as painful as raw wounds in the minds of the people. That year thirty people, young and old, men and women taken together, died in the Goroimari village. The marks left by the jaws of Death were still visible in each family. An absolute terror like a vice gripped the whole village. For they knew it from their age-old experiences that before the Goddess of cholera, even the complete incarnation of Lord Krishna is helpless.

The people of Goroimari went to the Mohghuli to bathe at noon and discovered some corpses drifting down the river. They waited till the corpses were completely out of their sight. Then they bathed in the same river, filled their pitchers with water for drinking and returned home. At that time only trader/moneylender Puranmal Jain of Kanrigaon had a concrete well and there was no second concrete well within a distance of ten miles in the area.

Hardly had they finished their meal at noon when the news spread that the grand-daughter of the village headman started symptomatic vomitting. As if the entire village was breathless with terror at that moment. In every family one began to look pathetically at another – the husband at his wife, the parents at their children — again and again as if it was their last staying together. The old villagers discussed the matter among themselves and on the afternoon held *nam kirtan* — a session of singing devotional songs. While nam kirtan was in full swing, the news reached that three boys had to be buried. Some young men had to leave nam kirtan to bury the bodies.

Cholera ravaged the Goroimari village for about a week. One-third of the population was decimated within a week. Out of the total population of two hundred and twenty-six, seventy-two people took shelter in the cremation ground. When the epidemic was over, a deathly silence fell on the village. People began to take stock of the situation – who died and who survived. His wife Memeri and the two daughters survived in the family of Duryodhan. He left the world with his two sons.

Beula was six years old and Menaka, four.

Within a night the luck of the Memeri's family turned. The relatively comfortable exsistence they were used to changed beyond recognition within a single night. With the paddy stored in the granary and a deposit of about three score rupees still with the trader/moneylender, they would perhaps sustain themselves for a year. Then they would have to take on bartering paddy for fish and lime extracted from snail shells. During the lean season of fishing would begin the phase of selling their belongings – pots and pans. When everything would be sold out, after one meal they would go hungry as they simply could not afford the next two or three meals. Of course, Memeri was too familiar with this way of life. That was the way of her life from her birth to her wedding. Only in the middle she saw the face of happiness for a few days by dint of her husband.

Memeri heaved a deep sigh and braced herself up for the coming hard days.

*(The original Assamese novel is **Matsyagandha**)*

(To be continued)

Mamoni Roisom Goswami

No introduction is required for Mamoni Roisom Gowsami (Indira Gowsami) in the world of Indian literature. A writer of immense power, unimaginable vitality and rare sensitivity, her writings also have a strong undercurrent of passion and sensuality along with rare refinement at the sametime – the gift of a superb writer.

Chenabar Sōt (the English version *The Chenab flows on*)– her first novel, is set on the shore of the chenab in the shadows of Himalayan foot hills and Vaishno Devi temple. It portrays the raw energy of the people who are engaged in building a bridge in the inhospitable terrain of submontane Punjab-Jammu boarder. It is a rare depiction of subaltern human relations and the relentless struggle for survival of the disadvantaged in this cruel world.

Mamoni Roisom Goswami

the chenab flows on

Translated by **D.J. Borah**

When she came near the field, Soni saw that the clean soft carpet of grass that covered it had disappeared. Heaped on it were used crane buckets, oxygen cylinders, grabs, pipes, concrete plates, crusher tools, etc. She had been familiar with these things since her childhood. She had grown up playing amidst these discards.

Today she felt that this dump of copper-coloured, rusted things which had made the green grass invisible, looked like a hideous sore. She sat at ease under the *chinar* tree known to her. She looked up lifting her head, to the leaves in the crown of the *chinar* tree. Those smooth placid leaves remained as a load of peace as over.

From the small dispensary surrounded by a woven bamboo fencing, one or two persons started coming out. The shortest road to the dispensary went below this *chinar* tree. If one went through the 'site' one had to walk some distance over the sand banks. Soni saw a *Khalasi* coming out limping from the dispensary. She recognized him, he was Resham Singh Khalasi. He was young. Earlier he was a helper to the carpenters who fixed 'ghuri' in the bridge or 'patta' in the quarter of the Babu Sahibs. His work was sloppy. If he was asked to bring the 'barma' while holes were being drilled in the wooden 'fatta' to bring in the pipes, he would fetch the nail hammer instead. None of the old carpenters working for the company like. Darshan Singh, Sadhu Singh, Karan Singh wanted to take him as a helper with them.

When Soni left, he was working as the caretaker of the three dogs of the memsahib of the company's 'Vaz Sahib'. In the morning after getting up from bed he would take the dogs to walk around 'Riyashi' 'Pauni' and Talwar areas. At noon he would wash the dogs with soap in the Chenab, make a fire outside and cook spiceless meat for the dogs and feed them. At sunset, behind the line of the chinar trees, he would bring out all the three dogs to the veranda, kneel down for hours and shine their coats with a brush. Vaz Sahib's memsahib would then sit in one of the easy chairs of the veranda, kept on shaking her legs and would scrutinize his handiwork.

When he saw Soni he came and stood near her. He was a little surprised.

'When did you come?'

'Yesterday.'

He tried to put down the burlap sack he carried on his back near her, but in doing so his lame leg wobbled and an assortment of pipe equipments like pipe wrench, chain wrench, etc. fell out and scattered on the ground. He ignored that and lifted

his injured leg before her. It was covered by healing wounds caused by dog bite. One wound was deep. A bandage was over it. She smiled and said,

'Is it why you left?'

He nodded with a dry laugh. Then he stood up and put his scattered implements back into the burlap sack and walked away limping along the path. Soni could understand that he was not satisfied with his new job. A few workers wrapped in bandage on their head and limbs passed by along the path before Soni. Those workers were unknown to her. They must have belonged to the new Rajasthani gang. Then four other labourers passed her by. They carried a 'khatia' bed on their shoulders and it had a person on it covered from chin to feet with clothes. There was no way to make out who the person was. That must had been the man who fell from above on the rods of number four pier. That meant that he didn't have to go to the big hospital at Udhampur. Before she left for Kalahandi somebody had told Soni that he would die. Many labourers survived their accidents, only her Gaurishankar died. A man clad in a pair of shorts and a dirty vest then came out of the dispensary. Soni saw that he was the 'mate' of the gang she used to work with. He came in a fast walk and when he reached her he stopped suddenly.

'When did you come, Soni?'

'Last night.'

'How did you come? I mean, how did you travel the way from Pathankot? Who came with you?'

'Who else will come? I cannot leave the old man behind. We came by bus from Pathankot and from Jammu we came by the company's lorry.'

'Then you didn't have much trouble coming?'

'No.'

'The people from Kalahandi must have left camp by now.'

'What will they do by leaving the camp? They have sold their cattle and the utensils. They will have to shrivel up of hunger and die if they leave camp. After three or four rainstorms have passed, the Government has said that the camp will be closed down. There are lots of things to be said about Kalahandi, but Soni did not say anything more.

The mate brought out a 'bidi' from his pocket and started smoking.

'You take your card from the office at 1 p.m. I will tell the attendance clerk. Will that be all right?'

Soni kept her head down and started thinking of other things.

'What's the matter? You are showing such unconcern?

Soni lifted her head and smiled.

'Those whose needs are greatest can only show such unconcern.'

The 'mate' softened. He wanted to offer a 'bidi' from his pocket to her, but before he did so he remembered that she didn't smoke bidis.

'You come then. I am leaving now.'

'Go.'

The 'mate' disappeared before her eyes and spontaneously Soni spat out – *namak haram,* 'betrayer'.

He wore a wrist watch, a fountain pen dangled from his vest in his chest, the workers respected and feared him. But Soni always felt him to be a cheat, because after coming to Chenab hé married a Rajasthani worker and forgot about Kalahandi. In the last famine his father died of hunger. The old man died without causing harm to anybody, but why did Gaurishankar had to die? A strange grief started twisting inside her breast. She is not the woman to indulge in this kind of grief. She tried to remember about Kalahandi, and she then remembered Sarbamati.

Sarbamati's travails were no less than hers. Oh, how grotesque, how cruel was that sight! Soni closed her eyes and the whole episode floated before her eyes like real... Here Sarbamoti is coming like a possessed woman towards the cowshed. Her hair was unbound, the torn sari she was wearing was hanging from her waist, her breasts were bare. She was running towards a calf tethered in the shed with a large cutting knife (dao) in her hand... Oh, the old man Arjun was trying to hold her back. Her teeth clenched, she was hissing through her nostrils.

- ' I don't believe in religion, I don't follow religion. Let me go, you old fool.

Yes, great was the grief of Sarbamati, oh, how she used to sing, how she used to wear flowers in her hair, how she laughed! But what was it that happened to Sarbamoti in the end!

Soni heard the twelve-o-clock noon siren from the site. She got up and started walking towards the camp.

Soni saw old Ramveer sitting in Nakoiya's shop. When Gaurishankar was alive, be too used to sit the whole day in this shop. The old man was still sitting in the same posture, holding his knees to his chest. Soni's face flushed with anger – the shameless man!

Soni's steps became faster as she crossed the shop. She came and entered her room in haste. Her belonging had lain scattered all over the place since last night. The things in the room needed changing. Before the old man used to sleep in a 'charpaya' (cot) under the hanging roof in front of her dwelling. In day time Gaurishankar used to place the same 'Charpaya' cot outside under the shade of the neem tree. The old man used to sit on it and ate his rotis (unleavened bread).

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When Soni reached the office to collect her card lafter keeping the rotis for the old man wrapped over the cot and depositing the keys at Nokoiya's shop, the attendance clerk Pritam Singh was sleeping stretched out in the wooden bench of the store. There was nobody else in the store. Even the lame boy who used to bring tea for the clerks of the store was not there. Soni stood by the door and first called out softly

'Babu, babu, hey babu...'

Then she started to shout – 'Babu, babu.'

The attendance clerk got up from his siesta with a start and sat on the bench. He stared at Soni's face with the blood shot amber like red eyes. He kept looking in such a way that Soni felt a little uneasiness.

'Now you are coming for a card? Where were you all these days dead, eh? After finishing his words the attendance clerk suddenly gave a start – 'You are Gaurishankar's woman Soni!!' He got up fast from the bench and started rummaging inside the drawer of a table for the card.

'Here, take it. Come regularly to work from tomorrow. People die, nobody can stop it... go, you will also die one day.'

Soni went to the site and found that Parvati, Raghamma and Dhonmai were sitting in the shadow of the number four girder and eating rotis. All three of them gave a start when they saw Soni.

'When did you come? Why did you come?' All three of them shouted together. Soni observed that some fried vegetables fell down from the piece of roti Raghamma had put in her mouth.

'If I don't come, who will feed me?'

'Chi, chi, without finding a man first you came back with the old man like this...?'

Dhanmai didn't allow her to complete.

'How will she take on a man? She has a baby in her womb.

The scrutinizing stare of all three of them now fell on the lower part of her stomach.

Clutching the loaded head baskets under their arms Krishnabai and Shanti came and stood amidst them. They sat kneeling down and looked at her lower part with a mocking stare. After some time Krishnabai couldn't keep her mockery within her any more and blurted out,

'You came back from Kalahandi without doing anything about it! You should have come clean. Now the trouble you will have to face carrying that sack of salt inside you.'

All of them then started laughing loudly.

Soni's face reddened. A vein started throbbing in her forehead.

'You all don't have to worry about me. You can do such sinful things – I cannot.

They now snapped back like a beaten dog, what, have we spoken anything that is not true? The whole world knows with whom you are staying. And you are telling us that we commit sins. You – harlot...'

Soni controlled herself with great patience, because she knew one of the minor reasons of Raghammas displeasure at her return.

A quarrel would have ensued then like other days if Parbati had not seen the mate advancing towards them with an iron rod in hand. They ... rushed towards the place where concrete was prepared.

The new site engineer Godbole Sahib had one day suddenly brought Raghamma's husband Sadasiva from site work and made him the night watchman of engineers quarters and mess. On this there was heated debate among the workers of site, because there was no apparent reason for this strong muscular man who could work hard like a machine to become a night watchman. Usually the weak and the sick were given that post. The previous watchman Ram Singh was not a bad man. He used to cough whole night thereby reassuring the frightened Sahibs and their mems at night.

When Raghamma heard about Sadasiva's new job she flew into a rage. Because she knew him thoroughly. He looked strong but inside he was a very weak man. He had strong craving for liquor and women. She looked at his eyes and said, 'I know why you have taken this job from Sahib – I know everything.'

'What can I do? I also don't like to stay awake the whole night and sleep at day.'

Raghamma then buried her head in his chest and started sobbing.

Sadasiva's hand played up and down through her hair.

'I know Raghamma, Panna and Ramu would not be able to sleep well if I am not there. I will have a word with the Sahib. Now cut me a watermelon. I shall go to Sahibs office now – go, go, don't cry for no reason. Come, get you up.'

Raghamma went inside. For a long time she had not heard such sweet words from Sadasiva. But when she went to bring a watermelon down from the suspended shelf she suddenly remembered that water has started surging down the Chenab. The boats which plied on the river were teethered on the twisted steel cables on both banks.

From her doorstep she looked at the pieces of wood floating down on the current of Chenab. A piece of wood, she saw, would immediately disappear in the eddies and bends of the river like an arrow flying from the bow of an archer.

-No, no, you don't have to go to office today. I can't let you go along the hanging bridge..

- 'But I have to work there only.'

- 'You remember Gaurishankar, don't you?'

- 'Why should I remember about Gaurishankar ... who can take away one's destiny?'

Raghamma brought the watermelon down from the hanging shelf, sat on the floor near the cot Sadashiva was sitting and began to cut it.

Sadashiva observed that she had no flesh or blood in her body! Her hand and feet were coarse and calloused. It was as if all the flesh and juice from her limbs have been squeezed and deposited in her lower abdomen which swelled obscenely! She was heavy with child. After he married her from Kalahandi she had been giving birth to a child every year. This year also she would have one. The thought became unbearable to Sadashiva.

He got up from the cot and left without a word. He heard Raghamma shouting for him near Nakoiya's shop.

Raghamma must have shouted from near the two mango trees, so even though he heard her clearly he did not turn back.

In Nakoiya's shop Sadashiava saw that old Rambir was sitting as usual hugging his knees to his chest. Nakoiya with a pencil struck over his ear was silently looking at an old Hindi film magazine. All others had gone out to work. There was no rush in the shop. Sadashiva took out a piece of bidi from his pocket and lighted it from the hanging coir rope smouldering at one end. Nakoiya dangled a picture of a naked woman before the old man and started laughing heartily. The old one opened his dim eyes wide, stared at the picture and bowed down his head. Nakoiya

lifted the picture towards Sadasiva. Closing his left eye and with an obscene gesture Nakoiya said, 'Heard you have became a king – bravo.' Sadashiva did not dislike Nakoiya's word, 'King', the news of his job had created quite a reaction. He said,

Don't know whether I will become a king or a slave. – Nakoiya patted his back few times and said, 'you have good youth in you. The Sahib's eyes have opened.'

Sadashiva felt proud at heart. He furtively examined his own chest.

'Now you are into good days, you clear all your debts to me during this period.'

It was as if the changed situation had made Sadashiva a new man. He brought out a ten-rupee note from his pocket and threw it on the lap of Nakoiya.

'You have really become a big man, wah, but don't show off too much. You have to give me another five such notes.'

Saying this Nakoiya flashed the note before Sadasiva's eyes, and Nakoiya's smile had disappeared. Before his eyes a penniless slave had started behaving like a king! It was not something a greedy trader like Nakoiya could easily digest.

Without replying Sadashiva went with long strides towards the bridge. His duty was to feed stones to the crusher machine. But Godbole Saheb had asked him to rest by day and come for night duty. Sadashiva felt light and free. When he crossed the fourth girder and reached the crusher machine he saw that Raghua, Laxman and others were at work. It was impossible for anybody to recognize their faces covered with stone dust and sand. Raghu was walking on the gangplank with a basket of stones on his head to feed the crushing machine and when he saw Sadashiva he stopped short.

'Aye Sadashiva! – You have really become Sadashiva.'

Sadashiva laughed. He crossed the crusher machine quickly because he was wearing a clean shirt. Though the pant had multiple patches still it was a clean one. The handkerchief he bound on his head was also large and clean. For the first time Sadashiva thought that the hur hur – ruh ruh, hur hur – ruh ruh grating sound of the stone crusher was really very unbearable. He went and straightway climbed the ladder to the top of number fifteen pier. From this point the hanging bridge started- a bridge made of iron rods and concrete slabs. One had to walk very carefully on the top. The bridge would start swaying with the weight of a single man. Legs trembled here. And below, the current of the Chenab was not a flow of water only, but an arrow flying at a high speed. 'It was like lightning current, like a sharp edged steel sword. Gaurishankar's memory came to his mind. Previously Sadashiva used to cross this hanging bridge by jumping from concrete slab to slab like the other 'Khalasis'. But today he stepped very carefully. At that moment Sadashiva felt a new found fondness for life. With every step he glanced at the water of the Chenab flowing twenty feet below He suddenly felt, 'No, this is not the dangerous current of the Chenab but it is an undulating garland. A garland made of white flowers that one sees on the way to Vaishno Devi from Katra. There is no difference between the foam floating on the crest of the current of the Chenab and the flowers of Vaishno Devi mountain. This garland is worn by Vaishno Devi herself. Today Sadashiva also had caught the fragrance of the

garland. After crossing the hanging bridge Sadashiva climbed down to the ground by the ladder like a monkey. He had come to this bank everyday but today Sadashiva felt that this bank of the Chenab nestling along the mountains was more beautiful than the other bank. On his way to the quarters of Godbole Sahib, Sadashiva suddenly stopped for sometime near the company's garage. He saw that the company jeep was parked near the quarters of Godbole Sahib built with plaited bamboo mats. When he observed closely he saw that the Sahib and memsahib were both sitting on cane chairs on the left side of the house and were taking tea chatting and laughing. Beyond, further to the left he saw a group of Rajasthani girls coming out of the labourers' quarters with clothes and going down to the sand banks of the Chenab to take their bath. Their nervous giggle mingled with the gurgle of the Chenab and bounced on the slopes of Vaishno Devi mountain. Sadashiva felt that the pebble-covered bank on the other side of the Chenab was very rough indeed. Standing near the garage like that Sadashiva saw Mandal driver emerging from the store above and coming down the path whistling. Within these few days Mandal's moustache seemed to have broadened. He had folded up the legs of his trousers. His shirt was also eye catching.

'Hey friend' Mandal grasped Sadashiva's hand.

'You will come tonight then.'

'One has to, when Sahib has said so.'

'Very good! – let's shake hands.' Mandal squeezed his hand.

'But I don't understand it properly. I have just understood that at night I have to go to the camps of Katra, Udhampur, Thandapani and Talwar, Beyond that I have not understood anything.'

Mandal laughed imperiously.

'There is great pleasure in it. The betrayers can be trampled down at this time. Come, come to my house.'

Sadashiva remained silent for sometime after he heard Mandal. Then like an obedient mongrel he followed Mandal.

Mandal took out the keys from his pocket and opened the door to his room. In the last night's storm a piece of bamboo matting from the wall of his room got torn and was hanging down to the ground like the long tresses of a girl combing her hair. In another place, through a hole in the matting one could see the sky, the shimmering waves of the Chenab, the strings of light bulbs hanging from the bridge, and if one looked closely the logs floating down on the current of the Chenab.

Mandal pushed a wooden box towards him and asked him to sit down.

'You will start your duty only from night. Now you don't have anything to do.'

'Yes.'

'Ok, get up from the box for a moment.'

Sadashiva got up. Mandal opened the lid of the box and took out a stout bottle. He closed the box and asked Sadashiva to sit on it again. He gave Sadashiva the bottle and went into the cooking shed.

Carrying two glasses on one hand, a hurricane lamp and two *papads* (wafers) on the other, he came out and stood before Sadasiva. He put down the glasses on the floor, kept the two papads atop them, Mandal then brought out a match box from his pocket and lighted the hurricane. Then he began to roast the papads on the tiny flame of the lamp.

'Ram Singh was on your job before. He could not do it. Govinda Singh is a faithful man. He did not care about Sahib's lust. Moreover, he was sick with asthma. The whole night he would keep on coughing.'

Sadashiva was scrutinizing the amber colour liquid of the bottle with great interest. The label had the picture of a powerful warrior astride a horse with his face covered with an iron mask and carrying a lance in hand. Sadashiva looked at the picture on the label in admiration. What was written above and below the picture he didn't know, neither did Mandal. But both of them believed that the liquid inside the bottle had the strength of the powerful warrior in it.

Therefore Sadashiva didn't pay any heed to Mandal's words about the trustworthiness of Guru Govind Singh's disciple Ram Singh.

'Ah! The papads have turned black. It would be nice to eat them hot, come, give me the bottle.

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Emerging from Mandal's house Sadashiva saw it was pitch dark outside. The lights on the bridge were blinking on and off possibly due to some problem in the powerhouse. Sadashiva then crossed the heaps of iron ladders and rock pills broken by rod blasting by leaps and bounds. Climbing on to the hanging bridge from the top of the pier, he did not seem to hear the dangerous sounds of the current of the Chenab twenty feet below. When he entered through the door he saw that the children had gone to sleep. Only Raghamma was sitting near the stove looking towards the door. She came up when she saw him. Sadashiva sat on the edge of the cot and started fanning himself with his handkerchief. She came very close to Sadashiva, placed her hand on his arm, and spoke near his face.

'You have given up that job?'

'No, I haven't.'

The smell of liquor hit Raghamma's nostrils. For sometime she stared at Sadashiva's fierce eyes. Then she sat down at the floor and started sobbing. Sadashiva got angry. He growled like a fierce dog.

'You like it when I rot like the common Khalasis on a two-rupee daily wage? Do you know how much Sahib has promised to increase my wages to?'

Sadashiva stretched the ten fingers of his hand before his eyes. Then he ran his hands over the hair of the sleeping children and said,

'They will be able to drink the milk sold by the Gujjar milkmaids and will be as chubby as Sotalal's son. In Holi you will be able to wear a silk sari and apply 'haldi' and 'kumkum', Raghamma.'

She got up and went again to the stove. The coal had turned to ashes in the stove.

Still she lifted the pot of vegetables on it. She smiled silently. This man didn't notice anything. Would she be able to move about during this Holi? A thought which depressed her for long time submerged Raghamma with pleasant feeling and shyness for the first time.

* * * *

Sometimes the soft gurgling sound of the Chenab changed into a raging roar. No trace of the stony aprons on her banks remained and water, water flowed everywhere! It would take away company's sand, bags, rod, shuttering plates from the banks. And Soni felt a great sympathy for the man who worked over the surging waters at that time. Company's washed away things, dead bodies everything would float down and gather at Akhnoor.

One morning after getting up from bed Soni said that water of the Chenab had receded from the stony banks. The morning sun light fell on a part of the stony bank and from a distance the round white stones of the area looked like duck's eggs. Another shaft of sunlight had illuminated the earthen huts of Talwara village.

Soni went to that sun-bathed area on the bank of the Chenab to take her bath. It was at the bend of the river. She had wrapped a piece of cloth over her sari at waist – the cloth which she wore everyday during bathing.

She sat on the large moss covered green stone where she always used to sit. And when she sat like that another woman would emerge from inside her shell and would loiter in the water of the Chenab river. That day also the woman emerged from her and loitered in the water seeking something. Suddenly she heard somebody shouting from behind.

'Soni! O Soni!!'

Soni turned and saw Parbati standing atop the hill from where the path to the bank came down. She let her hair fall and her long tresses flew in the air. And behind her back the yellow Chinese lantern tree was in full bloom.

'What is the matter?'

Parbati came down to her.

'What do you think sitting here.?'

'Nothing. I look at the water. Do you see these red and blue stones? If you throw them in the river do you know where they go?'

'Where?'

'To Akhnoor'

'Soni?'

'Yes, they go to Akhnoor.'

Parbati straightened and looked towards Soni's eyes.

'Sah, Soni the things you do, come lets get into the water'

Saying that Parbati took off her blouse. Kept it along with the sari she was carrying under her arm over the stones.

When they got into the water, Soni felt that the layer of water near her brest was only warm and rest of the water was as cold as the ice melt of the Pir Panjal, Kaji

Nag, Nanga and Harimukh mountains. The stretch of waters where they swam was separated by a long sand bar from the main body of the river Chenab. This long sandbar sometime appeared only for an hour as so. Whenever the women labours of the Oriya, Rajasthani or Telegu Gangs saw this sandbar appearing they would come to bathe at this place. Otherwise they crowded around a spring in Talwar. The main disadvantage of bathing here was that this place could be seen clearly from the graph camp set up on the hillock near Taiwan. Prabati didn't pay much attention to it. One of her related brothers stayed in the Graph Camp. His work was earth cutting and standing with a red flag in hand on the main road during blastings. Parbati used to visit the Graph camp in his company. If somebody asked she would say she had been to the market in 'Riyashi'. But everybody in the camp knew that when she felt the desire to wear a new sari or kumkum she would go with her brother to the Graph Camp.

Both of them came out of the water and sat on a stone in the bank. They dried each others hair, wrapping it with a cloth and wringing it. Once Parbati stopped drying her hair and asked a strange question –

'Tell me, on oath of yonder Vaishno Devi, you have not slept on the same bed with Rabi's old man?'

Soni was dumbstruck for a few moments. Then she brought both her hands together and raised them towards Vaishno Devi.

Parvati felt a little pang of hurt inside her bosom. She massaged one of her arms and said –

'If your Sivanna comes now, would you go with him?'

'Shivanna....!!'

Soni hummed the name within her mind. A name thrown into a corner in her mind with disgust and hate. When she was a mere eleven year old ignorant girl, when she used to play in the sands of the Baoda river, at that time she was married to Sivanna. She never felt the need to keep that name embellished with colour and imagination in her mind. That was long long back, now if she even tried to recollect his face. She is thrown into a turmoil. He was in Kalahandi, she was on the bank of the Baoda river. During the famine in Kalahandi he suddenly disappeared one day. People saw he went away riding on a rod-carrying dumper of the company. He escaped fearing that he would have to feed her. What is the need to keep the memory of that heartless man alive in her mind? Moreover, she had completely grounded that memory to dust after her marriage to Gaurishankar.

She turned to Parvati and said – 'traitor' and then she spat out.

Parvati got an opportunity to gather in her net. Soni was starting to wrap the sari around her body when Parbati suddenly grabbed at the cloth over her breast and uncovered it. Then she exclaimed in surprise,

'I have never seen such breasts before.'

Without waiting for Soni's answer she brought her face near her ear and whispered something and Soni's face turned white when she heard it. To lighten the situation Parvati said,

'Don't mind, I was just joking.'

Raising her eyes Soni looked at her. But she couldn't laugh – nor could she utter any word. During their way back Parvati tried many times but Soni didn't open up. It was as if she has discovered a spool of thread inside her mind to engage herself. How far away she had gone unreeling that spool Parvati could not make out.

* * * *

After the concreting was over, the guarders assumed a dusky brown colour. Sprinking water on these was a very tedious job. Water from the Chenab was pumped first to the storage tanks then with a pipe the water was sprinkled over the concretes guardors.

A pipe in hand, Soni tried to trace patterns with the water jet on the concrete. Sometimes she tried to draw old man Rambir's face. If she didn't hear the mate's voice in the vicinity she would let the water from the pipe flow over her legs. Bubbles used to emerge from the pipe and the water coming out of the pipe like a fountain used to cool her legs. Playing with the pipe near her leg, she was suddenly jolted by shouts of a group of people. On to the shuttering plate which was readied for laying of the number five fire girdes, a new Sahib with a group of people behind climbed up by the scaffolding. The old Vaj and Bajaj Sahib of the company also came with him. Soni retreated with her pipe to the number two girder. She saw that crane operator Balowant, coal feeder labour Raghu, even welder Bhagawat taking away his dark welding glassed, stopped work and started observing the spectacle. This Sahib was a new one, dark and stout, he wore a 'Topi' on head and carried a rod in hand. He was the 'Burra Sahib' the company sent when there was some trouble in the works. The Burra Sahib started to kick and examine the number four girder from one end. There was a big commotion for few days when cracks appeared in a part of it some time back. The old mason Tukaram and the group of Rajasthani masons hurriedly mended the cracks with plaster. Soni saw the new Sahib bending down and examining the plastered area by sounding it with the rod he carried. One could hardly make out the plastered area, from a distance it appeared as if some water had been plashed on the concrete. Still the Burra Sahib didn't seem to be satisfied. Sahib then started arguing with the masons and the supervisors standing behind. He had arguments with Vaz and Bajaj Sahib. While getting down he did a strange thing. Without wasting time to go down the scaffolding, he caught hold of the hook dangling from the chain of the crane and swang down to the ground like a monkey.□

(The original Assamese novel is Chenabar Sõt)

(to be continued)

Arindam Barkataki

the assamese novel : the beginning

Translated by **Mitali Goswami**

The history of the development of the Assamese novel is unlike that of the novel in any other region of India. Though it is generally agreed that the novel owes its birth to the rise of the middle class and to the European impulse, it is also undeniable that the novel is much enhanced by the inherent story telling tendency and eternal search for self-definition of a society.

The socio-historical circumstance which gave an added fillip to this impulse of self-definition in Assam was the Industrial Revolution which brought in its wake a new middle-class society, an urban philosophy, greater opportunities and machinery for publication and circulation, a scientific and rational mindset which traversed a route of conflict and fear to attain social awareness and a public sense of significance. As a genre, the novel is more affiliated to the cause of the masses and hence is always at odds with those in power, with authority end with the traditionalists. This faction invariably deprives the novel from governmental or royal patronage.



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In Assam, the factors of social exposure and consciousness, and of individualism which are considered necessary for the writing of the novel came quite late. The social structure was rigid end conventional till the coming of the British and as such was not congenial to the birth of the novel.

February 24, 1826 brought into effect the Treaty of Yandavu which became the harbinger of British rule in Assam. But it was not until 1838, that the whole of Assam, including upper Assam, came under the British yoke. Being the last of the territories to come under British rule, Assam underwent the destructive rather than the constructive effects of colonial administration. Moreover, for their own convenience, the British also established Bengali as the official language in Assam from the year 1836 to 1873, during which time Bengali was not only the language of administration but also the medium of instruction in the schools of Assam. This was a deterrent to the development of the Assamese language no doubt but how far it effected Assamese society is in doubt considering the very few schools running in Assam at the time. To take a count, the number of schools in Assam was one in 1835, only two in 1845 and a mere 7 high schools till the year 1873. At the same time it cannot be denied that pro-British feelings prevented many prominent Assamese citizens from taking up cudgels for their own language and state, a tendency which has continued down the times to plague Assam even in the post-independent times.

The birth end development of the Assamese novel is very intimately related to the process of the re-establishment of the Assamese language in Assam. Closely related to this process was the rise of periodical literature in the state. The ***Orunodoi***, the first Assamese magazine was published by the Baptist Missionary Society in 1846. Spreading the tenets of the Christian religion was the main impulse behind this publication. But the publication of the ***Orunodoi*** indirectly aided in the development of the Assamese language, particularly Assamese prose which developed from a rough and unstructured stage to a stage refined enough for the writing of novels. The Missionaries needed the local language in order to communicate with the common people of the state and also to spread their religion. As a result, they set up the first printing press in Assam, printing and publishing not only the first newsletter but also the first dictionary, the first grammar book and several prose selections. All this set the stage for the birth of the Assamese novel.

The process of structuring the Assamese language into a language fit for publication was also taken up by the American Baptist Missionaries. But the subject matter of ***Orunodoi*** was too deeply religious and failed to give its readers a taste of the liberal Humanism of European literature. Most of the stories and articles publish in ***Orunodoi*** perpetuated the cause of Christianity and sought to establish the Christian way as the only way of right living. Among the stories published at the early stages were ***Jatrikor Jatra, Ruthor Kahini, Kamini Kanto, Elokeshi Baishar Kahini, Phulmoni aru Karuna***; and so on. All these stories were based on right living and conduct as per the Christian value system. The values of individualism and equality, freedom of mind and spirit which are required for a proper evaluation of the social and public sphere were as yet undeveloped in the Assamese consciousness.

Gradually this kind of religious writing failed to inspire or motivate the Assamese mind. Many saw through the subterfuge and this was evident in writings like ***Bahire Rong Song Bhitore Kuwa Bhaturi*** (Hemchandra Barua, 1876). Though a strong story line was not to be found yet the piece depicts the vacuity of the social life of the time rather well. Hem Chandra Barua was the foremost among Assamese grammarians and lexicographers. He authored the first grammar and the first dictionary in the Assamese language. Adopting a logical approach Barua used the language to make a realistic appraisal of the social conditions of the time. Right after this, the year 1884, saw the publication of Padmawati Devi Phukanani's ***Sudharmar Upakhyan***. It was not a historical narrative per se, but considering the society and the position of women during those times this novel gains a rare historical significance as the first novel written by a woman in Assam.

Starting with 1846, the year of the first publication of the ***Orunodoi*** till 1890, the year of the publication of ***Bijuli*** several other Assamese periodicals saw the light of day. Among these were ***Asam Bilasini*** (1871-83), ***Asam Bandhu*** (1885-86), ***Mou*** (1886), ***Asam Tora*** (1880-90), ***Jonaki*** (1889) and ***Bijuli*** (1890). The publication of these magazines brought into effect a new literary era in Assam and greatly advanced the cause of Assamese prose. This periodical literature also proved influential for the novel.

The year 1873 is a landmark in the history of the Assamese language because Assamese was established as the official language of Assam after much struggle.

The year also marks a great resurgence of school education in the state. Assam had only eleven middle English schools in 1873, but this member increased to thirty-two by the year 1889. The number of high schools, similarly increased from seven in 1873 to thirteen in 1898.

The rise of Assamese medium schools considerably increased the Assamese readership and thus encouraged magazine like ***Jonaki*** and ***Bijuli*** which initiated the publication of novels in serialized form. Thus the first Assamese novel ***Bhanumati*** (1891) and the second Assamese novel ***Padumkuwori*** (1891) was published in ***Bijuli*** and ***Jonaki*** respectively. Such publications gave a timely impetus to the Assamese novel and two more novels ***Lahori*** (1894) and ***Miri Jiyori*** (1894) were also published in like manner.

The rise of the Assamese novel and the resurgence of the Assamese language occurred simultaneously and both were steeped in the indigenous flavour of the region; in the social milieu and atmosphere. Among the first four novels the most popular was Rajani Kanta Bordoloi's ***Miri Jiyori***. In this novel Bordoloi depicted a tribal social scenario with a progressive outlook.

The years 1890 to 1950, was a period of rapid development in the Assamese novel. The period was also one of immense social significance – rise of the intellectual middle class as well as a socio-cultural renaissance of sorts. The middle class was now properly established in Assam and had a significant social presence. Assam also witnessed the Peasants' Uprising during this period. It is worth mentioning that in Assam it was not the intellectual class but the peasantry, that spearheaded an organized movement; without any impetus from any intellectual on outer source. It was much after the establishment of the Assam Association in 1903 that the Assam faction of the National Congress forayed into Assam.



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The Assamese novel too, developed much during this period. Starting off as historical narratives the novels now acquired a strongly social perspective as well as a reforming zeal. Three important events of this period were the establishment of Cotton College, the first college in Assam (1901), setting up of the Assam Sahitya Sabha (1917) and the Gauhati University (1948). These were strong influences in the intellectual life of Assam.

The period also saw the publication of two of the most highly acclaimed novels of all times written by two of the stalwarts of the novel in Assam. These novels are ***Jibonar Batot*** (1944) by Bina Barua (Birinchi Kumar Barua) and Prafulladutta Goswami's ***Shesh Kot*** (1948). Both Barua and Goswami later became professors and eminent folklorists and internationally known scholars. But the similarity does not end here. Both authored only two novels each, giving the impression that they had tried their hand at writing novels only to set the standard of the Assamese novel before embarking on purely academic pursuits.

The modern age of the Assamese novel can be said to have dawned in Assam through the periodical ***Jonaki***. It was in the pages of this magazine that the liberal and humanistic novel ***Jibonar Batot*** was published. ***Shesh Kot*** in which Prafulladutta Goswami embarked upon his search for modernist sensibilities, was likewise published in ***Jonaki***. ❑

Dr. Parag M. Sarma

an ethnocritical approach to Birendrakumar Bhattacharya's *yaruingam*

I would like to enter into my contentions by briefly putting forward the main tenets of Ethnocriticism. According to Arnold Krupat, who strongly vouch for the idea, "the ethnocritical perspective manifests itself in the form of multiculturalism ... that particular organisation of cultural studies which engages otherness and difference in such a way as to provoke an interrogation of and a challenge to what we ordinarily take as familiar and our own ... is consistent with a recognition and legitimation of heterogeneity..." (Krupat1992:03). It seeks to replace the 'us and them' oppositional mode with a dialogic mode more concerned with difference rather than opposition, and dissolve borders and boundaries from absolute categories to shifting spaces where cultures encounter and deal with each other. It is not only about shifting spaces, but is in fact located within it. Ethnocriticism as an approach is of recent vintage in the United States of America. It seeks to appreciate Native American expressive forms against the backdrop of a pervasive and dominant western episteme and calls for a legitimation of heterogeneity. It brings into play different conceptual categories like culture, history, imperialism, anthropology, and literature and takes an interdisciplinary approach to interrogate universalising theories. Though the specificities of the situation in the United States and the North East of India would be quite different, it is felt that the ethnocritical approach can be profitably adapted to a work like *Yaruingam*.

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A kind of inclination towards metanarratives was emerging in India in the first flush of Independence and at the time when this novel was set and written, the conscious attempt was to consolidate a larger Indian identity and within it generate regional identities by processes of homogenizing. Attention was paid to forge unities by pushing into the backburner obvious diversities. Concepts like a *greater Assamese nation* were also facilitated by the spread of the Assamese language, as Benedict Anderson had pointed out in a different context, "as instruments of administrative centralization" (Anderson1983:40-41) by both the colonial administration and the immediate post-independent set-up. Thus an administrative vernacular like Nagamese evolved. Birendrakumar Bhattacharya inhabited these socio-political narratives and one should view his interest in the Tangkhul Nagas keeping this perspective in mind. Inimical to the postulations of ethnocriticism is the urge to speak for or interpret the other. This could be a coercive mean to appropriate the 'other' to dominative discourses or nationalistic metanarratives.

Ethnocritical writing is noncoercive and is situated between cultures and is not an engagement "... in writing or in acting out a tragic or comic destiny or identity but, rather with recognizing, accommodating, mediating. Or indeed, even bowing under the weight of sheer difference (Krupat1992: 124).

In his preface to the original Assamese version of *Yaruingam,* Birendrakumar Bhattacharya declares that his stay with the Tangkhul Nagas was an attempt to understand their way of life. But he found it as ***difficult as dealing with a stone that can't be lifted.*** Disclaiming that his love for their way of live was a love for *primitiveness*, he yet goes on to say that in their *primitiveness* he glimpses constituents of the quest for a new life. He says that the Nagas too are a people, but a different kind of people; beneath the facade of uncompromising iron will lies the beauty of a timeless humanness. These apparent contradictions in his preface clearly point out that the author was on uneven ground, a territory that he was not familiar with. He was clearly trying to move between cultures, perhaps attempting to live another kind of life. This moving between cultures, an engagement with otherness and difference that interrogate the familiar, the *comfortable own*, is central to the postulation of the ethnocritical approach.

In *Yaruingam,* Birendrakumar Bhattacharya interrogates the emerging parameters of the Indian consciousness of his time by dialogising the nationalistic project in the shifting cultural spaces of the north-eastern fringes of post-independent cartographic reality. Bhattacharya is perhaps adopting, what Gayatri Spivak's calls, a deconstructive philosophical position in offering an impossible critique of a structure that he himself "inhabits intimately" (in Krupat 1992: 08), for as the novel bears out, he was a committed nationalist. However, instead of the predominantly Hindu and Aryan *sastric* brand of Nationalism, we have a mostly Christian and Mongoloid alternative paradigm, the cultural encounter being represented by the excursion of the likes of Rishang to Calcutta and the Assamese schoolteacher Jivan's excursion into and marriage in the Naga heartland. There is a discernible narrative tension between the author's intellectual veering towards emerging metanarratives of nation and nationhood and the autonomous dynamics of an objective portrayal. So we enter the novel with Videsselie's dream of "liberating the whole country and forming an all embracing new nation" a nation under the tutelage of Netaji. However, counterpoised to this was Ngazek's assertion, the Tangkhul elder and almost an ideologue, that "Videsselie would not like to stay under anybody. He spoke like a true Naga. A true Naga will give his head first and then his freedom". To Ngazek, to be a Naga was to be free (1960: 26-27). Thus, by the time we leave the novel, Videsselie wants to bring freedom to the Naga people like Gandhi had brought freedom to India.

However, counterpoised to this ideal of recovering lost liberty for the Nagas was the cynicism of the likes of Rishang and Khating at the "half crazed Angami's dream" (1960:15). To Rishang, maintaining a status quo was important, because it provided the scope for the community's development. Christianity and Indian democracy were the parameters that held for Rishang the potential for the fulfilment of the dreams he had for his community- education, hospitals and employment. Rishang's and Jivan's ideals were the overt coercive strategy of the author to appropriate the Nagas to the nationalistic narrative. Christianity was in itself an

emerging master narrative in the north-east, subsuming the traditional and ethnic way of the communities of the region. In a strange kind of way, Christianity becomes for the author a potent force for consolidating a larger Indian identity. However, beyond authorial intention was the latent disruptive threat present throughout the narrative in the clash between the clans of the Christian Yengmaso and non-Christian Ngathingkhui over the Church on the disputed hillock, which results in the tragic consequence of Yengmaso being mortally injured. Ethnic assertion also involved going back to the religo-socio mores of the past, which would result in dangerous consequences for the nationalistic project, and hence had to be reigned in.

However, Birendrakumar Bhattacharya leaves the novel in muted ambivalence. Videsselie, who had abducted Rishang and Jivan, refuses to punish them leaving justice to history. As he flees refusing to surrender and join the mainstream, one could sense an emotional non-coercive reaching out towards Videsselie's convictions (1960:232-237). Jivan's life remains only "half revealed", and "the people would remember him only as a man of thought – an eccentric" (1984: 323). What the author was trying to consciously do was to appropriate the Nagas to the emerging parameters of the Indian Nation. What he also, perhaps unconsciously, succeeded in doing was to polyvocalise the nationalistic discourse by offering an alternative paradigm. This is valuable, for as Homi K. Bhabha has pointed out in his introduction to *Nation and Narration*, it draws "attention to those easily obscured, but highly significant, recesses of the national culture from which alternative constituencies of peoples and oppositional analytic capacities may emerge – youth, the everyday, nostalgia, new 'ethnicities', new social movements, 'the politics of difference' . . . and assign new meanings and different directions to the process of historical change" (Bhabha1990: 03). It is time that the Indian socio-polity moved away from the coercive nationalism in the exuberance of the first flush of post colonialism, and perhaps "it is imperative to imagine a new transformation of social consciousness which exceeds the reified identities and rigid boundaries invoked by national consciousness . . . facilitate the emergence of what we might, after Said, call an enlightened 'postnationalism' (Gandhi1998: 124). ❑

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situating 'order': reflections on the 'political' in Mamoni Raisom Goswami's fiction



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There exists a large volume of Indian literature that deals with/in the idea/ paradigm of the 'political'.[1] In terms of variety in such treatment, one can certainly point to three legendary writers of the 20th century, viz., Premchand, Manto and Mahasweta Devi. Mamoni Raisom is perhaps one of the youngest in the pantheon of great Indian writers of the 20th century. Premchand's treatment of the 'political' in his writings is as a realist. It is his realism that brings out societal aspects such as power and authority in rural life, nationalism, gender, etc in fictions like *Godan*, *Kafan*, *Shatranj Ke Khilari* or *Sevasadan*. But it isn't what can be termed today as 'activist' fiction. On the other hand, Mahasweta's writings belong to the category of 'activist' fiction. In it, we find a frontal involvement of the self (the writer) with the political, a clarion for people to be *involved* in the 'political' and using literature as a vehicle for policy formulation or reformulation.[2] Her short stories like *Shaanj-Shokaaler Ma* (*Ma, From Dawn to Dusk*) or *Mohanpurer Rupkatha* (*The Fairy Tale of Mohanpur*) are fine examples of such 'activist' writings. Premchand and Mahasweta may be considered two variants within the aesthetics of realism in Indian literature. In between the two contrasts, we have the writings of Manto, particularly his fiction on Partition. Manto, in these fictions, despite his Progressive approach, shows an utter disenchantment not only with Partition, but with the idea of the 'political' too. To him, the 'political' has largely become a farce, symbolically as well in practice, a mindless game in which none wins. His *Khol do* (*Open It!*) is probably one of the starkest and finest of Indian realist fiction. But to express his perspective, it seams that at times Manto found realism an insufficient vehicle of aesthetics. His *Toba Tek Singh* appears closer to modernism, given the overt and covert symbolism in both form and content that characterize the story. Most of the 'political' in Indian literature can possibly be placed in various positions within a triangle, of which the above-mentioned writers form the three nodes. In such a background of Indian literature, where can the treatment of the 'political' in Mamoni Raisom's fiction be placed? Or is it that her fiction stands outside the parameters of the triangle? An answer to the question would lead one to a discussion of the idea of 'order' as opposed to 'disorder' which seems to constitute a paradigm for Indian literature in this context.

Imagining the 'political' in 20th century Indian fiction has been generally through

that of the nation. For Premchand, that political was that of the undivided Indian nation. For Mahasweta, the paradigm has been the post independence Indian nation. Manto came closest to rejecting the very notion of nation (due to the rejection of the idea of the political itself). However, that the nation exists and conditions the lives of the inhabitants was present in the plots and in the characterisations of his fiction. In contrast, in Mamoni Raisom's fiction, the 'political' exists, but the paradigm is not a nation.

The 'political' in Mamoni Raisom's fiction is more at a functional level, whether in terms of government or of militancy, rather than as a vision of a political order. This is apparent from the story *Jaatra (The Journey)* and the novella *Bhikhar Patra Bhangi (Breaking the Begging Bowl)*. In *Jaatra*, the abject poverty of the family, their memories of their past as members of the socially privileged, the sickening onslaughts of the present, the most dreary and powerful being the floods, and the very insecurity of the aging parents (their son having left them for militancy and their daughter being impregnated by an Indian army man) – all these factors or realities of the daily grind of life are as much important in the 'perspective' of the story as that of militancy. The son, in *Jaatra*, is important for being a son to any parents, and the constant fear of him being shot dead like some stray animal (in the adjacent railway tracks) lurks in the consciousness of the parents every single moment. The end in the story is interesting, for the pregnant daughter of the family makes an entry into the plot then, and it is also marked by the almost simultaneous entry of the wounded son into the house, and into the story physically as a character. The parents had generally ostracized the daughter for all practical purposes. But it isn't clear if that was due to her romance with an Indian army man or for becoming an unwed mother or the combination of both. But the son only spews feelings of hate and suffocation at the conduct of his sister. It was beyond him that love could be possible between an Assamese girl and an Indian army man.

Herein, one needs to highlight that appreciation of the political could assume different meanings if we take some other writings of Mamoni Raisom into consideration. For example, in *Neelkantha Braja (The Shadow of the Blue God)* or in *Debipithar Tez* (The Bloodied Temple), one can see the raising of a voice for an order where a woman has a respected place for being a woman, biologically and socially, and this is possible through social transformation and un-gendering society. The implicit political voice in these two novels, however, stands in contrast to the lack of a clear political voice in stories like *Jaatra*.

Whether Premchand or Manto or Mahasweta, they all work with an imagined notion/idea of order against which the reality of disorder is portrayed. But in Mamoni Raisom's 'political' fiction, the idea of an order itself doesn't seem to be notably present. But that there is a serious disorder is overwhelmingly exposed through the plot and characterization. The novella *Bhikhar Patra Bhangi* also deals with militancy. In this piece of fiction as well, disorder in the rural life of Assam due to political violence is exposed in a most powerful way. The plot revolves around the lives of the three women of the family, the mother and the two adult daughters, and how they try hard to survive amidst the daily problems

and with a male member (son/brother) having become a militant and therefore had now physically disappeared from their lives. But he lives in their memories and in their hopes of his eventual return.

Therefore, one needs to go back again to the point noted in the beginning, that Indian literature has generally worked with the idea of a (Indian) nation. It is this that made possible for the writers to project disorder by contrasting it with an order. That order is the nation, whether socialist or liberal or conservative. As already mentioned, Manto came closest to rejecting this foundation altogether in his Partition writings (which were his later writings). Does it, then, mean that Indian literature generally reflects the hegemony of a nationalist ideology upon it? In the discussions on the early Indian novels, the debate persists if aesthetics of Indian novel was influenced by nationalist ideology. Though S. Bandopadhaya pointed out that in the novels of Bankimchandra, such an influence can be seen[3], D. Menon[4] argues that in the case of early Malayalam novels from the lower castes, no such influence can be seen. Menon argues that for the lower castes, many of whom were slaves, the imagination of a collectivity called nation could come only after other more basic collective existence like family could be expressed and lived. Slaves in Kerala had no family life, given that the members of a family could be given away as gifts by the upper castes masters. When Assamese novels are taken into account, we have writers like Bezbarua who clearly was influenced by nationalist ideology[5]. But there were also writers like Rajanikanta Bordoloi[6] whose works deal more with collectives such as tribes and their social life than the nation. Therefore, the issue of novel or fiction in the 19th century as a national allegory may be a matter of debate. However, one of the prominent aspects of fiction in the 20th century was its concern with the national question. What could, and more importantly, should be the nature of the nation-state that India is. This ideological paradigm of a nation seems undeniable in Indian fiction of the century, from Premchand to Mahasweta.

To be noted further is that in the idea of order in the nation, the focus lies in the role of the state. It is the nation-state that constitutes the totality of order. In the case of the 'political' in Mamoni Raisom's fiction, it is the very absence of this idea of a nation-state that is most marked. One way to treat it would be a post modernist disbelieve in the idea of a nation-state. But for Mamoni Raisom, far more real and true would be the fact that frontier life (Assam is a frontier state of India) could hardly aspire for an order, unless it is a given commodity, given by someone from mainland, any mainland, for being more powerful. Therefore, in her other writings like *Datal Hantir Unwe Khowa Howdah* (*The Moth Eaten Howdah*) or *Mamore Dhara Taruwal* (*The Rusted Sword*), etc, whereas the idea of an order implicit in a nation-state is evidently present, in her political fiction, it is decidedly absent. It seems, therefore, that based on the understanding of the great French Marxist literary critic P. Macherey, one may contend that Mamoni Raisom's political fiction constitute genuine fiction in this genre.[7] In this context of the 'political' in their writjngs, a commonality that writers like Mahasweta and Mamoni Raisom share is that they narrate their stories as an outsider, witnessing and comprehending the tragedy unfolding before them. Both of them are themselves not subjects in any way in the stories; they are only narrators. In fact, they

are 'elites' who share sincere concern for the subjects of their stories.[8] But it is the difference between them that is more pertinent for us in the context of this essay. The difference between two such writers is that for Mahasweta, though her participation in the stories is as an outsider, it is nevertheless as an *activist* outsider. But for Mamoni Raisom, politically speaking, that participation is far more passive. There is no palpable involvement with the 'political' in any way. The involvement is much more in terms of the individual characters in the stories and their existential experiences in their respective lives. The focus isn't as much on the family or the society or the country (i.e. the collective) but on the individual and how the individual is living (or is forced to live life) as member of the collective. Mahasweta's *Draupadi* and Mamoni Raisom's *Bhikhar Patra Bhangi* can be a good illustration of the point. Such a feature in the political fiction of Mamoni Raisom can perhaps be explained once again by the notable absence of an idea of an order in such of her writings, a feature reflecting from an Althusserian perspective, the genuine character of her fiction. ❑

[1] The treatment could be direct (eg., Manto's *Toba Tek Singh*) or indirect (eg., Premchand's *Kafan*)

[2] Many of Mahasweta's stories are based on the sociological and political existence of the de-notified tribes.

[3] 'The Novel in Bangla' in *Early Novels in India*, ed. Meenakshi Mukherjee, Sahitya Akademi, 2002.

[4] 'No. Not the Nation', ibid.

[5] The ideology was Assamese nationalism.

[6] For example, his novels like *Miri Jeori*

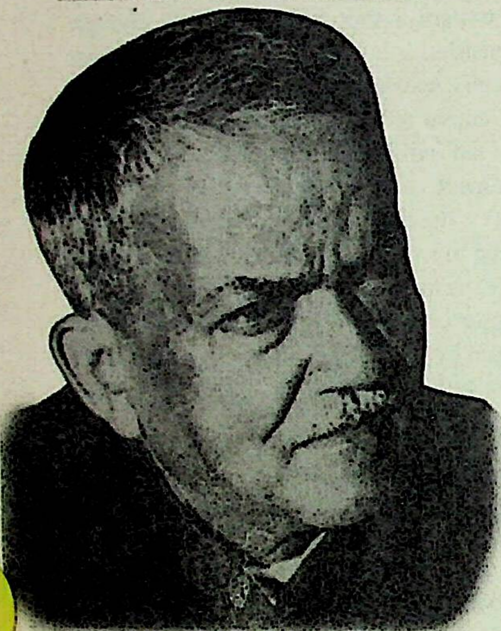
[7] Macherey, from an Althusserian perspective, argued that the uniqueness of a fiction is not that it is an extension of an ideology, as has been generally seen in Marxist scholarship. Its uniqueness lies in that it exposes through its silences the gaps in the ideology that it supports or opposes. Else, one piece of fiction would be identical to the other (when it is not) and that would not help distinguish the specificity of an individual work of art.

[8] Mamoni Rasiom does not constitute an 'elite' in her fictions like *Ahiron* or *Datal Hantir Unwe Khowa Howdah* or *Neelkantha Braja*. Therefore, her being or not being an 'elite' narrator depends upon the content of the fiction.

Ambikagiri Raichowdhury

it's the fire-lute's tune

Translated by **Pradip Acharya**



Ambikagiri Raichowdhury

Popularly known as *Asom Keshari* (the Lion of Assam), Ambikagiri Raichowdhury was a very influential figure of Assamese nationalism. A mystic and a rebel, Raichowdhury was a noted romantic poet and arguably the greatest love poet in Assamese literature. He has to his credit poetry collections including *Tumi* (You), 1915, and *Anubhuti* (Feelings), 1953. Pradip Acharya, our Chief Adviser and leading translator, has rendered Raichowdhury's poem ***i je agni-binar tan*** into English ***It's the fire-lute's tune*** in which Acharya succeeds in capturing the poet's revolutionary spirits, rhythm and even the rhyme scheme.

It's no song to soothe weariness nor a song of fun
It merges life and death it's the fire-lute's turn

It is infinite warmth transcending insults and hurts
It's the rage of fire welling out of the stifled hearts

It's the song of the gods' churning the sea for nectar
It's the drinking of the great poison death itself to conquer

It's the pouring of life's blood at the motherland's altar
It's that being that unites all brothers in a flicker

It's the sentiment that sheds all indigence, fear and dearth
It's that stamp of one form one sap one colour on the earth

It's a dire insult to see humanity faint and surrender
It's a mission to pound to dust the pride of the oppressor

It's the roar of thunder to wake the sleeping swallow of life
It's the disciplined march to our rights through struggle and strife

It's the history that witnessed Naranarayan's indignity
It's the feisty urge to die for life and its totality

It's the strike of cruel pain that seeks to strifle life
It's the will to humble those who disgrace man's strife

It's to wash away the thousand hurts comes the deluge
It's the mother's dictate that in death we seek refuge.



focus
JIBON NARAH

Jibon Narah belongs to a new crop of writers from communities so long regarded as on the margin of mainstream of Assamese society. These writers have reinvigorated Assamese language and literature by recording earthy and fresh sensibility and shaped the language of literature accordingly. Narah was born and brought up in his native Mising community, which has its own custom and tradition and perspectives of the world. But he was also quite familiar with Assamese society and culture from early age as his people lived as close neighbours of Assamese villages, and had daily contacts with Assamese people. He also had his schooling in Assamese schools. Thus he carried the pathos and the poetic character of Mising folk-songs in his views, while wading deep into Assamese culture and literature. The blend of two cultures in his sensibility has resulted in an extraordinarily suggestive richness of diction and highly coloured sensuous imagery. The rhythm of his poems also displays a striking freedom and variety. His poems have been translated into English, Malayalam, Marathi and other languages.

Dr. Hiren Gohain

Jiban Narah

fear of death and endless sorrow

Translated by **Kamal Ch. Saikia**

The river Abanari never dries up
Human woes too never end
Mother, we are all beings
Doomed to loneliness for ever,
(Ballad, Mising Folk Poetry)

My elder sister and I used to sleep together on a two-and-a-half-feet broad wooden plank as hard as iron with our heads laid on the same pillow. I mistook my own sister Guna as the daughter of my uncle, Padmeswar. The villagers too teased at her as Padmeswar's daughter because she was fair-looking and blonde like our uncle. She was very close to me and I joined her in all pretty details of her household work and preparation of her favourite dishes, for I took her for my cousin and was afraid that she might desert me at any moment. She was my constant companion in all my activities right from games and sports to going to school. While on bed at night I used to put one of my legs across her waist – this habit of mine still remains. Sometimes my heart palpitated and a long shudder passed over my body when my uncle talked of taking her away. An inexpressible sadness haunted me because of a mysterious fear of missing her forever. I got up at night after she had fallen asleep and began to watch her very intimately from her head to feet in the dim light of the kerosine wick. Rather hesitatingly I stroked her toes and fingers, and repeatedly observed whether or not they resembled those of my own. Surprisingly enough, even in those early days I found out a sort of resemblance in her little finger, and the nose projecting itself as hillock like that of mine. I brought my little fingers to a slight contact with hers : rubbed my nose very carefully with her nose without waking her up. One day while I was doing it my sister made a jerky movement in her sleep. At this I burst into tears and she too woke up and joined me, 'What's wrong with you, my brother? What's the matter?' I still don't know why I began to weep. It was perhaps a child's irrational fear of death – a deep-rooted fear of missing my dear sister. For the sake of dispelling such a fear that haunted my mind I whispered to myself, 'Oh! the ***moon*** and the ***sun***, you must not take her away from me. I shall give you anything you want in return...'

(2)

A deudhai observed, 'Her days are numbered, there is now no use of crying for her.' The witch doctor coming from a far-off region said, 'The winding thread of her reel has just come to its end. It is now God's wish that she should be released from her earthly confinement and go back to her abode.' Groaning on her death-bed she frequently pointed to her head. She ran a high temperature with a splitting headache. She could not speak and the tears that rolled down her cheeks stained the white bedcover with spots. In my later age the facts of her death haunted me. Once during my university days, when I had been hospitalised at the Medical College for typhoid her memories aroused in me the fear of death.

(3)

The day of her death brought to me an extremely disturbing experience of my early childhood. A haunting fear of death stayed with me all along like a sadness. Before her death I had neither witnessed death nor understood it. Instead, I remained assured that a man died only in his old age. But her premature death frightened me with a fear of death as all my beliefs had proved wrong. Eventually the situation had got such a turn that two young boys (Rajen and Tutu) guarded me all the time moving beside me like a shadow. I startled even at a gentle call from behind and rather unconsciously cried aloud. The elder sister of my father kept a rust-coated clasp knife and an iron ring hanging from my neck in an attempt to disple my fear. I was also asked to keep beside my bed a blunt siakle. The young boys who guarded me all through had been with me for two to three years. Gradually I developed a profound intimacy with them, for Rajen could nicely play the bamboo flute and sing, Tutu had the natural ability to amuse people by jesting with sprightly sense of humour. Surprisingly, in those tender days I could appreciate the sound of the flute and the songs and the magic melodies made my fear-ridden mind temporarily free from its woes and worries. It was also for the first time in my life that I spoke slang learnt from them because they often uttered certain words and sentences before me which I had not heard till then. I came to know in later years that those words had been the slangs words not used in civil society.

(4)

The death of my sister Guna caused my mother to weep bitterly. She lamented in the tune of traditional *Mising* ballad (caban) and I also wept inconsolably with her. The nature of our weeping was sometimes different. It was a kind of blending of anger and woe which sometimes made me rather exasperated. I broke anything into pieces either by beating it down or throwing around. Sometimes I would knock my head against anything because of some inner disturbance I felt. My head still bears many such injury-marks. When ceaseless weeping rendered me unconscious, people picked me up and laid on the bed. The real understanding of death slowly dawned on me when people washed her body, shrouded it with a piece of white cloth and were waiting to bury it.

Guna was in fact my own sister — a child of my mother and the daughter of my father. She was not, as I thought, my cousin. This fact made me all the more sad and an inexpressible feeling silently tortured me more than the cause of her death. Even today I cannot forget that heart-rending grief. What I came to know in my

latter years is that she was sold to my uncle in return for a pair of betel-nut and leaf and a coin (valuing a quarter of a rupee). Our family traditionally believed that one could get rid of diseases by such practices. That was why each and every child of our family was sold ceremonially to others in expectation of our good health and spirit. It was also treated as a special custom in our family to visit the buyer-families on special festive occasions such as *Bihu* with a bagful of areca-nut, betel-leaf, snacks, *Apong* and so on. We were to offer a respectful bow at their feet.

(5)

The ripe figs were among the favourite fruits of our early childhood. We moved around in crowds to eat them. One need not do much labour to eat the figs for they were up for grabs at arm's length. But I've not taken any fig since the day of her burial at a place under a fig-tree encircled by clumps of bamboos. After her death, a couple of years later I happened to see her grave while accompanying our domestic help to the bamboo-grove to cut some mature bamboos.

Ripe figs had fallen from the tree and covered her grave like a carpet. The juice oozing out of the cracked pale–reddish figs flowed to the ground. This sight reminded me of my sister's agonised face on her death-bed. The fig-juice seeping out of the cracked figs brought to my mind the early image of tears rolling down from her left eye. The inconsolable woes of bygone days once again assailed me from some dark unknown recess of my heart. I burst into tears and wept in tune with the hacking of bamboos by the boy. The fibres of the ripe figs looked like the congealed forms of her heart's agony. The pains that she could not express on her death-bed seemed now to have burst out. Even now, in rainy seasons, when I see figs, green or ripe, floating, in the rain puddles, they seemed to me like her eyes drifting aimlessly. I had hardly overcome the grief when my younger brother, Bhabesh, died untimely for want of proper medical care and our whole family had to endure the woes of death again. My mind still leans on the fear of death and endless sorrow it brings in its wake. ❑

Kamal Ch. Saikia teaches English at Dr. B.K.B. College, Puranigudam, Nagaon. Recently he has translated Assamese poems and prose pieces into English.

Notes :

Mising : One of the ancient riverine tribes in Upper Assam with a rich tradition of folk-culture, oral literature and colourful ethnic costume.

Deudhai : A member of the priestly class.

Bihu : The national festival of Assam.

Apong: A traditional fermented beverage made from rice.

Sun : Worshipped as mother-goddess by the Mising

Moon : The male god as father in Mising folk-belief.

the tourist - 3

Please don't mind,
turn left.

Suddenly I fell from my cycle.
He helped me up.
On my left
the wheel stayed turned left.

Did you hurt yourself?
No, not really.
Just bruised my left arm.

Mind it, look where you go
you country lout
may be first time in a town
hey, turn left.

I turned and brushed against a girl
Can't you see?
Yes, I have seen.
Kundera put his left hand
right on your breast.

Is Kundera obscene
or the left arm is spare
"hey, no! it's not done to reach out
your left hand to your betters."

Suddenly mother's voice!
Or may be an illusion.

There is no air in your tyres.
No?
The tyre's belly is deflated
bearing the burden of your body.
So are we flattened
Fie, this enchanting land.

So, you're pumping air into it –
Kundera put the girl on a rickshaw
on his left
and went away calling.

Hey there! slow down
may be your left grip is slack
oh no, the rickshaw is gone too far
I can hardly catch up.

Kundera, Kundera!
You're just like my father
my *ma* too always slept
on the left of my father.

Translated by Pradip Acharya

songs

Songs that emerge from the nethermost depths
Churn her heart
What more does one need
Words bloom splitting the darkness
Songs diverge all around
The descending sky of casements
Rinses the darkness
Rinses the heart's depth of depths.

Translated by Krishna Dulal Barua

the fires are descending on the waters

A plot of mustard
Is spattered on the eyes

The advancing men stumble
The shrieks of a herd of cattle in the dead pond.

Tree-full fruits fall and scour for mouths
The smile in the lips is transfixed at the gateway

The fires are descending on the waters
The men too.

the strains of unknown birds

It's alright that you're accompanying me
Don't get frolicsome
Seeing the doves at play

Don't fling stones at the middle of the river
The fish would be aggrieved
The affliction would cause small-pox

If you come across a downpour on the way
The herdsmen would arrange plantain leaves for you
Or else you'll catch fever
When you run a temperature you'll blame the village
Regard rains as a nuisance
Abuse the river
O townsfolk
The unknown lads who had
Arranged plantain leaves
Wouldn't be asking your names

Can you see how the sun has been concealed by the hill
The boats on either side by the river
The buffaloes by the herdsmen
The flutes by the lips

Well night has fallen
O' townsfolk
Retrace your steps
Don't be intoxicated by the strains of unknown birds
Go and endeavour with the books on the table.

Translated by Krishna Dulal Barua

Krishna Dulal Barua teaches in English at Bebejia, P.K.S.H.S. Higher Secondary School, Nagaon and music at Rudra Barua Sangeet Academy, Nagaon. Barua has consistently translated Assamese prose and poetry into English and won the 'Katha' award for translation in English.

you smell like ripe paddy

I love you
Go down to the river

You're a drop of rain
Dip in the river

You smell like ripe paddy
In the wind will drop the smell

Step in the river

The sun is in the east
people in the west

Dip in the river

You've got soaked
as I wanted

Come out of water
soaking wet

To my granary I'll carry
your fingers fragrant as ripe paddy

I love you

People are in the east
the sun in the west

Come on let's turn yellow
like the sun
watchfully

hands are flowers

Everyone on earth
can reach out an open hand
towards the sun

In the shade of thousands of hands
will grow thousands of flowers
from the shady soil

The sun will turn into a flower
None will complain at
picking up the white and blue flowers
of pain and pleasure

Men are trees
hands flowers
a riot of colours
stretching out towards the sky

The hands will be kites
You may see
merging with the colours of the sky
— all blue

Translated by Nirendra Nath Thakuria

Pankaj Thakur

beyond reason

a piece of bangle

Translated by **Rupanjali Baruah**

It was a day in the month of January, the year was 1991. I was then in Vellore for my sister Mandira (Joon's) treatment for her brain tumor. In every eight to ten days, I had to visit Madras (now Chennai) to buy her medicine. The distance between Madras and Vellore could be traversed by bus approximately in four or four and a half hours. Buses plied at night too. So there was no difficulty in returning the same day.

By the evening of that particular day, I could collect that specific medicine called DDAVP by paying double its price from a pharmacy in Madras after I had gone around for the whole day in search of it. Though the pharmacist charged me a high price, he then seemed to me a godsend because after Joon had been operated upon for her tumor that was growing beside the pituitary gland, she developed another ailment- artificial diabetes (diabetes insipidis). There was only this medicine DDAVP to save her from the terrible consequences from this dreaded disease. I don't know if the conditions are same today but in those days this medicine was manufactured only in one country in the world – Switzerland. One bottle of it lasted only fifteen days.



Pankaj Thakur: Editor of three anthologies of economic, literary essays and satirical stories, Thakur has translated a couple of books, and plays of Ibsen and Jean Paul Sarte. At present, he is a Management Executive of an automobile company.

I hurried carrying the bottle of medicine in my hand and arrived at the bus stop for Vellore around 8.30 pm. I got the last ticket on the bus that was just getting ready to depart. I took the seat that the conductor pointed out to me. And then all the desperate anguish and fatigue that I had gone through while I had waited for that rare medicine suddenly left me and so I sat down heaving a sigh of relief.

Our row had four seats. A teenaged girl sat next to me, beside her sat her younger brother and next to him was a girl in her twenties. Apparently they came from the same family. The bus began to move. I heard them converse among themselves in Tamil, I could not understand them. I had an English magazine in my hand. A little later, the girl beside me asked me in fluent English if she could borrow that magazine. I smiled as was my wont and with an affirmative gesture gave her the magazine. A smile full of easy eagerness spread all over her face and I could discern that her sharp observing eyes meant to say more. We introduced ourselves in the manner as most passengers do. The girl next to me was Gita, she was reading in class IX, the boy was her brother Tathagat who studied in class VI and the other girl was Lata who had just passed her B.A. She was Gita's elder sister. Their parents sat in front of us. The family had come the previous day from a place near Vellore to Madras; the reason was to discuss about preparations regarding Lata's marriage with the groom's family in Madras and to let the boy and the girl meet to know each other and such other matters.

The moment I said I was from Asom, the three of them sat up showing a lot of

interest. They put too many questions to me on Asom, particularly Tathagot and Gita. Lata quietly listened and whenever we turned toward an amusing anecdote, she would just smile. The children's amiable nature and their many questions to know more about Asom truly touched me and so, keeping in mind the tender age of Tathagot and Gita, I tried to give answers to their queries as simply as I could. They had already read a lot about Asom's Kaziranga and its one horned rhino, the winter in Shillong, its orchids and pine trees, the war cemetery of Kohima and Manipuri dance. In order to set their curiosities to rest, I told them with my natural love of the north east about all those excursions I had undertaken on agile elephants' back conducted by Asom's Tourism, of those experiences where I had seen wild boars, deer, the thrilling sight of thousands of white herons flying away together, the tea gardens scattered in and around Kaziranga that resembled a green carpet, the sound of the wind shattering through the pine trees in Shillong in the month of January. When I mentioned that the sound seemed as it were someone was wailing, it startled Gita and made her suddenly clasp my hand and pull it to herself. That feeling tugs at me sometimes. And I also told them about the weeping willows by the side of Ward Lake that looked much like a newly married Indian bride trying to veil her demure face and how under those trees, too many young Khasi boys and girls met everyday with happy merrymaking. And I told them about the long meandering grey colored, serpentine road that I had traversed several times between Shillong and Cherrapunji, and whenever I crossed that stretch of road, it seemed to be the long lustrous hair of a young woman. Gita also put questions to me about the Asom movement; she said she had read about the foreigners' issue in the newspapers.

The Tamilnadu Government bus whooshed ahead through the night. It halted only once for a minute; we bought some peanuts from a vendor and shared them among us. The bus then moved on. I came to know by way of our conversation that Gita loved to paint. Her sharp watchful eyes had made me assume that she had a natural flair for finer things. And just then I remembered Neel Pawan Barua (Neelda) under whose kind supervision so many children and youths have derived inspiration to take up art and whose art work I believe deserves entry into the world's any major art platform. Gita had never heard of Neel Pawan Baruah but through her interest in art she had been familiar with the art work of great masters like Gaguin by going through books on them in the library. She mentioned that she had observed M.F.Hussain's works with interest. True, I have never ventured to try my hand at drawing anything apart from those that I had to do under compulsion during my school days; nonetheless visual language has always fascinated me. When color and the magic of lines successfully bring alive the content of a painting, it gives me endless joy of a discovery. I told Gita about my views on art and about my feelings for art. I told her about my experiences in visiting the frequent exhibitions at Jehangir Gallery where I could see the new creations of different artists of the world. And I also told her about the art work of Neel Pawan Barua, Benu Mishra, Hemanta Mishra, Prasenjit Duara, Pulak Gogoi and others. I told her of all those paintings of those artists that which I could with my limited knowledge faithfully recall just because Gita showed a sincere interest in them. She listened with interest and I accepted her request to show her some of those art works when she would visit Asom. Gita asked me several times why I do not paint. A terrible question, I do not yet know how I am to answer that.

Nobody had told me to take up painting nor did I see any piece of good art work in my childhood. It was during my college days that I began to find opportunities to know and understand art. So I told Gita the truth about the whole matter. And yet again Gita pursued me with the same question; why I had not taken up art lessons in my college days. The second time the question made me feel that I had committed a grave crime by not learning to paint, at least this was what the probing made me feel. I did not know what I was supposed to say- and in not being able to give a satisfactory reply I instead smiled rather sheepishly at her. I could not give an inane reply to those grave and serious questions because that would hurt her. So I did not say anything though I made it quite clear that I had never truly given a serious thought to that matter. I could not know what Gita thought of it. I urged her none-theless to carry on with her own interest in painting. I did not realize how late it was since we were so taken up with our conversation. It was only Lata who reminded us that it was close to midnight. An hour later, they would get off and then sometime afterwards I too would arrive at my destination. When she heard about the hour, Gita like a little girl rested her head on my shoulder and said aloud "let me sleep here for a few minutes." And the word promptly left my lips "ok." A few minutes passed in silence. Suddenly Gita sat up as it were she just woke up from a deep sleep and in a very casual voice said to me "please give me your hand." I did not know what this sweet but serious looking girl was up to. Like one in a trance, I held out my hand. She put something into my palm and said "keep it with you." I looked at my hand feeling strangely happy and amazed and saw that it was a bangle which Gita had pulled out of her hand to gift it to me I clasped the bangle with a profound feeling and without quite being aware of it I retreated back those long twenty–four years and stood quite close to Gita in her school days. And thus with equal childlike innocence I too put in her palm the Wilson pen from my shirt's pocket and in the same breathe said to her "keep it with you."



Rupanjali Baruah (b.1960): Freelance writer, poet, art critic and translator, Ms Baruah has published writings in leading newspapers and journals both local & national. She has contributed her writings on the art scene and artists of Assam for the last seven years which has given the attention to the works of the eminent artists of Assam. Also an artist using oil, acrylic, mixed and unconventional media.

In the pale glittering light inside the bus, I could see that in an instant a joy had spread across Gita's face. And her sharp twinkling eyes meant to tell me of many other things.

Meanwhile, the bus arrived at a particular stop. Many scrambled to leave. Gita and her family too joined in. Everyone said their polite goodbyes. I invited Gita's family to visit Asom. I reassured Gita "I shall take you to Kaziranga, Shillong, Cherrapunji, and show you the rows and rows of pine and willow trees." Gita did not say a word. She got off slowly smiling a little mysteriously. I got off and walked them over a little ahead. The bus then began to move again. Though they were physically moving more and more away from me, I felt them returning closer toward me. Gita's enigmatic smile still lingers in some corner of my heart, I am yet unable to fathom it clearly and there still remains in my palm that beautiful gift from Gita- a piece of bangle.

I do not know where Gita is today. I would not know if she still continues to paint or if she ever came to visit Asom, I would never know about that but I still cherish that short meeting with that girl who carried a cheerful faith in living though she was just then at the threshold of her youth, her conversations that were so full of abundant feeling of sincerity are alive in me just as her bangle which I treasure still with loving care. ❑

Prosenjit Chaudhury

yajnaram, modernity & beef

Translated by Anuj Goswami

It is generally believed that the first person to be educated in English in Assam was Anandaram Dhekial Phukan. The noted historián Surya Bhuyan writes in his biography on Anandaram Dehkial Phukan : 'He was the first person to be enlightened by English education and then spread it in the State.'[1] It was repeated in other biographies written in recent times also.[2] But the information is not supported by the facts of history. It can be seen from the chronicles of the Assamese language and culture that Yajnaram Dhekial Phukan was in fact the first person to be educated in English from Assam. Traditinally, the eldest son had to offer *pinda* on his father's death and as such Holiram Dhekial Phukan, the elder brother of Yajnaram, was taught only Sanskrit. If he were to learn English, a foreign language, he would have forfeited the right of offering *pinda* on his father's death. But Yajnaram had no occasion for such inhibition.

Prosenjit Choudhury (b.1946): A serious writer on the social, cultural and historical issues of Assam, Sri Choudhury is the author of nine books in Assamese. He has also jointly edited three books – one on Jyoti Prasad Agarwalla, one on Bishnu Prasad Rabha and the third on the religious thoughts of Gandhiji. Nineteenth century Assam is his special field of study. Sri Choudhury has recently retired as a Professor of English from the Dakha Debi Rasiwasia College at Chabua in Upper Assam.

According to Gunabhiram Baruah, he mastered several languages like Sanskrit, Bengali, English, Persian, Arabic, Urdu, Bhutanese, etc. Baruah says, 'No one in Assam had such mastery over English as he had when the first school was established in Guwahati in 1835.'[3] Anandaram was only six years old at that time.

The biography of Anandaram written by Gunabhiram Baruah contains valuable information on Yajnaram.Yajnaram went to Calcutta to learn English after the Britishers took over Assam in 1826. While returning from Calcutta, he brought an English teacher with him. He contributed money besides offering other assistance to the first school established in Assam.[4] Compared to other figures of the Assamese middle class of his time, perhaps Yajnaram offered the most active and open support to the spread of English education in the state. While in Calcutta, he might have felt that the future of the Assamese middle class would be bleak in the British Raj without English education. Besides, it seems probable that he was influenced by views of Raja Ram Mohan Ray on education.[5]

In Calcutta Yajnaram got interested in the upheaval created in the minds of urban the Hindu middle class due to the conflict and integration between the Western culture and the Indian culture and religion. Gunabhiram writes: 'Yajnaram went to Calcutta after a few day's stay at Guwahati. In Calcutta, he attended the prayer sessions started by Ram Mohan Ray. Ram Mohan was an important person at that time. He was an Archayya of the Brahma Samaj. Yajnaram was one of the group of persons with whom Ram Mohan first started Brahma Upasana.'[6] Gunabhiram also mentioned the Brahma Sabha situated at Sitpur Road in Calcutta. The Sabha was established by Ram Mohan and his associates in 1828. So it can

be inferred that Yajnaram, as a participant of Brahma Upasana, was in Calcutta in 1828. Amalandu Guha also inferred that Yajnaram stayed in Calcutta from 1827 to 1829.[7] This period was very crucial for Bengal. An upheaval was created among the urban educated class of Bengal by several incidents such as the establishment of the Brahma Sabha, initiation of the rationalist thinking by Derozio, abolition of the practice of Sati and the organized reaction of the conservatives towards these issues. There were no doubt that Yajnaram was influenced by the social upheaval of his time. In the words of Gunabhiram- "After being under the tutelage of Ram Mohan Ray for sometime, his religious and social thinking developed to a very high standard."[8] Yajnaram was the first person to carry the message of the cultural upheaval of the Bengal to Assam.

Yajnaram maintained his contact with the cultural world of Bengal after his return from Calcutta. He wrote several articles in the newspapers of Bengal. He translated an English poem 'Lucy and her Bird' into Bengali which was published in *Samachar Darpan* on 30th July, 1831. He also wrote a letter in the same paper on 9th July, 1831 applauding the British Government for banning the practice of *Sati*. In the same letter, the castigated a section of Brahmins for their orthodoxy and mentioned the positive role of Ram Mohan Ray.[9] Yajnaram's political views may be known from this letter also. He was loyal to the British as per the class character of the newly emerged educated middle class of Bengal. When Mr. Jenkins came to Assam in order to prepare a report on the state, he along with Moniram Dewan presented him a report on the history and natural resources of the state.[10] Gunabhiram also mentioned that Yajnaram was a friend of Mr. Jenkins and Mr. Methi, two British officers of his time. Just before his death, he placed his children and his house under the custody of Mr. Methi[11]. In this context, the loyalty of Ram Mohan Ray towards the British may be mentioned. Ram Mohan says, "Indian needs British suzerainty for many more years."[12] We also find a clear expression of loyalty to British Raj in a memorandum submitted to British by leaders of Bengali middle class such as Dwarakanath Tagore, Ram Mohan Ray, Prasana Kumar Tagore, etc. It was said to be written by Ram Mohan. It says, "The inhabitants of Calcutta, who enjoy in many respects very superior privileges to those of their fellow subjects in other parts of the country, are known to be in like measure more warmly devoted to the existing Government."[13] How the loyalty to the British Raj and the class interests of the middle class are related may be clearly gauged from the quotation mentioned. Needless to say that the expression 'inhabitants of Calcutta' means the persons belonging to the middle class. It is the character of the middle class to show its own interest as the interest of the nation.

In this context, we may mention another letter written by Yajnaram and published in Samachar Darpan on 19th May 1832. In the letter, he advocated the introduction of the Hindustani language in Bengali script in Assam. He even made a plan for writing a four-volume textbook in Hindustani.[14] This letter is very important for the chroniclers of our language and literature. Even when Assamese was the language of the state and Bengali was not imposed as state language as was done later, why did the leading figure of the Assamese middle class in the early 19th century advocate the use of Hindustani instead of his native language in Assam? It is generally believed that the leading figures of the Assamese middle class were not

responsible for the loss of status of the Assamese language after the annexation of Assam by the British. The letter referred to above is a clear proof that the above view was not correct.

A new wave was created in the socio-cultural sphere of Assam after the British and came to Assam. The modern sociologists term this wave as 'Westernization'. The Westernization process had not become widespread in India due to some socio-economic factors, but the western lifestyles, customs and values were taken up by a section of the middle class. The first and the best example of Westernization in Assamese society was Yajnaram. Mr. Adam White describes the modern life style of Yajnaram in the following words: "He makes no objection to dine with Europeans and eats and drinks freely of what is put before him – beef and veal not excepted. He procures a variety of wines and European delicacies from Calcutta and his house at Gauhati is amply furnished with chairs, tables, carpets, an organ, art glass lusters and other articles of English furniture."[15] Now the question arises, where did Yajnaram get the inspiration to drink liquor and eat beef in the company of Europeans in the early 19th century Assam? The westernization process started in early 19th century in Assam was closely related to that of Bengal. Ram Mohan also used to drink liquor. Historian Jogesh Chandra Bagle says, "The practice of drinking liquor by the so called progressive people was started by Ram Mohan."[16] Rajnarayan Bose, a disciple of Ram Mohan, celebrated his initiation into the Brahma Samaj with a drink[17]. Yajnaram might have started to drink in the company of Ram Mohan. But the same comment might not be applicable to in case of the habit of beef eating. Ram Mohan was a bit conservative about his food habits. His friend Mr. Adam writes: "He believed that it is necessary to observe all the Hindu rules and regulations governing the habit of food and drinking. He never eat anything which was prohibited for Brahmins nor dined with non Hindus or anyone outside his caste."[18] The views expressed by Mr. Adam may be controversial, but there are other evidences to show that Ram Mohan was not completely unorthodox in his food habits. Ram Mohan did not eat anything ***uneatable*** in the two banquets organized in his honour by Louis Phillip in England.[19] While going to England, he took a Brahmin cook with him[20]. So it can well be inferred that Yajnaram did not get his habit of eating beef from Ram Mohan. There might be some other factors leading to this habit.

It is mentioned above that a unique social movement was initiated among the educated middle class of Bengal when Yajnaram was in Bengal. The leader of this movement was Derozio, a young teacher from the Hindu College. He was an advocate of free thinking. The members of 'Young Bengal' were inspired by him in their quest for truth through reason. Derozio established a debating society among his students under the name of 'Academic Association'. The members of the Association used to sit in his drawing room, drink liquor and eat meat[21]. Reverend Behari Lal writes about the activities of the Association. "The general tone of discussion was a decided revolt against existing religious institutions. The young lions of the academy roared out week after week, 'Down with Hinduism! Down with orthodox."[22] 'The members of the Young Bengal were so excited that they did not hesitate to throw away the bones of beef they had eaten into the houses of the orthodox Brahmins.[23] It may be inferred that Yajnaram was influenced by the

activities of members of the Young Bengal especially in the matter of eating beef. It may be mentioned here that Sri Tarachand Chakraborty was the secretary of the Brahma Sabha at the time when Yajnaram used to participate in Brahma Upasana with Ram Mohan.Chakraborty was also an important leader of 'Young Bengal'[24]. Yajnaram might have come to know about the activities of Young Bengal through Sri Chakraborty.

Noted historian Benudhar Sarma once told Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya that Yajnaram was influenced by Young Bengal Movement. Bhattacharyya mentions this fact in one of his books on Assamese Culture.[25] But he does not mention clearly the beef eating habits of Jajnaram in his book. Similarly Gunabhiram Barua also says nothing about it in his biography on Anandaram Dhekial Phukan. It is worth mentioning here that the historians writing in the ***Political History of Assam*** published by Government of Assam also showed their uneasiness on the food habits of Yajnaram. The views expressed by Adam White quoted above was also quoted in the ***Political History of Assam*** but the words 'beef and meat not excepted' were consciously left out[26]. The uneasiness of the historians was a reflection of their class and religious limitations. How can they label a person of the stature of Yajnaram who was the first leader of Assamese middle class as a non Hindu?

Before we conclude our discussion, we may cite an interesting example of unconscious distortion of history. Nanda Talukdar, a noted scholar, writes in one of his articles: "Yajnaram dined with the Europeans, drunk liquor and procured a variety of wines from Calcutta. But he remained a Hindu and never touched beef and anything 'uneatable' for a Hindu"[27] He also quoted the views of Adam White by writing 'accepted' for 'excepted'. Thus the sentence became 'beef and veal not accepted' and as a consequence Yajnaram became an out-and-out Hindu. How can a scholar of such eminence as Talukdar make such a mistake? When one is guided by blind faith or preconceived views, is it possible that his sense of vision may get distorted? Only a qualified psychologist can answer this question. But this question has a deeper significance. A historian blinded by his faith can never examine the history impartially. Such a historian is not an explorer of truth; he is a 'creator of truth'. ❑

Notes:

1. Surya Kumar Bhuyan, *Jonaki*, P.28
2. Nanda Talukdar, Editor's Comments, Anandaram Dhekial Phukonor Rasana Samagra. P.15. But in an another article, Talukdar acknowledges Yajnaram as the first Assamese to be educated in English (Unabinsa Satikar Budhijibir Bhumika, Samanay, 31st July, 1980)
3. Gunabhiram Baruah, *Anandaram Dhekial Phukanor Jibon Charitya*, P.28
4. Gunabhiram Baruah Op Cit P.28. Yajnaram donated one thousand Rupees for this school. (H.K. Barpujari, Assam : In the days of the Company, P. 27). It may be mentioned here that Hem Chandra Goswami says that Yajnaram raised two thousand Rupees from the public as dues to the Government and kept one thousand for himself (*Pandit Hem Chandra Goswami Rasanavali*, P.221)

5. Ram Mohan writes : '... the Sanskrit system of education would be best calculated to keep this country in darkness (J. Nag, Raja Ram Mohan Ray, P.53).
6. Gunabhiram Baruah, Op cit, P.18.
7. A. Guha, *Impact of Bengal Renaissance on Assam*: 1825-1855, in *the Journal of the Indian Economic and Social History Review*. Vol. IX, 1971, P.291.
8. Gunabhiram Baruah, Op cit, P.18.
9. A. Guha, Op cit, P.292.
10. Benudhar Sarma, *Moniram Dewan*, P.69.
11. Gunabhiram Baruah, P.29.
12. Ramesh Chandra Mazumdar, *Raja Ram Mohan*, P.93.
13. M. Maitra, *A History of Indian Journalism*, P.181.
14. A. Guha, Op cit, P.292.
15. Ibid, P.292. Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya feels that there was a odd mixture of the 'old' and the 'new' culture in the personality of Yajnaram. (*Derso Bosoror Asomiya Sanskritit Abhumuki*, P.55). The absence of the requisite socio-economic foundation necessary for the completion of the Westernization process in the country is a factor leading to such mixture of cultures. Bhattacharyya says that Yajnaram bought the title of Kharghoria Phukan from Purnananda Singha, the last of the Ahom Kings (P-55). But according to Gunabhiram Baruah, the said title was conferred by King Chandra Kanta Singha on Yajnaram.
16. Jagesh Chandra Bagal, *Derozio*, P.77.
17. Binoy Ghosh, *Metropolitan Mon Madhyabrittya Bridogh*, P.101.
18. Ramesh Chandra Mazumdar, *Raja Ram Mohan*, P.91.
19. Amitabh Mukhyapadhaya, '*Unish Satikar Samaj O Sanskriti*', P.107.
20. Ibid P.10. In this context, the views expressed by Derozio on Ram Mohan and his followers may be referred to. He says, "What his (Ram Mohan Ray's) opinions are, neither his friends nor foes can determine .... He has always lived like a Hindu. His followers, at least same of them, are not very consistent. Sheltering themselves under the shadow of his name, they indulge to licentiousness in everything forbidden in the sastras, as meat and drink: while at the same time, they feed the Brahmins, profess to disbelieve Hinduism and never neglect to have Poojahs at home." (quoted from A. F. Salahuddin Ahmed, *Ram Mohan and the process of Modernization in India* (Ed. V.P. Joshi, P.103).
21. Amit Sen, *Notes on the Bengal Renaissance* P. 19-20.
22. Binoy Ghosh : *Banglar Bidot Samaj*, P.70.
23. Binoy Ghosh : 'Bidrohi Derozio', P.102. Radha Nath Sikdar, a member of 'Young Bengal', exhorted the Bengalees to eat beef to regain their health. (Chitrabat Palit, 'Atmamagna Nabya Banga', *Desh*, 25th July, 1981).
24. J. Nag, *Raja Ram Mohan Ray*, P.95.
25. Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya, *Derso Bosoror Asomiya Sanskritit Abhumuki*, P.55.
26. H.K. Barpujari (General Editor), *Political History of Assam*. Vol-I, P.126.
27. Nanda Talukdar, Unabinsa Satikar Budhijibir Bhumika, *Samonoy*, 31st July, 1980.



Anuj Goswami : (b.1960) : An Engineer by profession and presently Deputy Director in the Assam Electricity Regulatory Commission, Goswami is trying to generate awareness both in economic development and in power sector of Assam through his various writings. A serious and thought-provoking writer, his writings are often published by journals and newspapers of the state.

Maan Barua

nomenclatures of the natural world: cultural constructions of nature in assamese society



Maan Barua: A very young and accomplished talent, Maan Barua is known in the nature circles of our country and abroad as the most promising naturalist and environmental worker. Study of nature, the flora and fauna of the state, specially of the Kaziranga National Park (where he lives) has been his passion. Birds and bees and butterflies attract him the most. He has been awarded many prizes for his activities – including the Young Naturalist Award.

Introduction

Every society evolves a set of nomenclatures in order to identify with the cultural facets and environment of that society. Cultural construction of nature is perhaps inherent to society and is sustained by a certain mode of living and a particular host environment. The manner by which the natural world is perceived and constructed, largely through a process of naming the various birds, plants and animals present in it, is responsible for the creation of a *weltanschauung*, a society's worldview regarding nature.

The understanding of how a society views the world is enhanced when its folk traditions of nomenclature are explored. Why it that there are extensive names for certain groups of plants and animals, whilst such names are lacking for others? Are folk beliefs and practices related to the naming of plants and animals in any way, and does this naming further the interests and values of a particular society? How does a society disseminate such forms of nomenclature, and how are they culturally sustained? These are some of the important exploratory questions that arise, and the objective of this narrative is to try and delve into some of these here.

Much of recent historiography in Assam has concentrated on social, political and economic aspects of history, but aspects of ecology have largely been ignored. In this study one has had to resort to a range of written texts containing oblique references in order to construe how the culture names and orders the natural world. The oral and musical traditions still extant in the region are important source material from which inferences have been drawn, and many of these traditions play an important role in disseminating folk knowledge. The extensive works dealing with the cultural history and folklore of Assam, have also been very useful when relating to traditional customs and practices, but as these are written keeping other objectives in mind, much of the content needs to be reevaluated, to be read in a new light in order to answer questions on the cultural construction of the natural world.

1 Taxonomy and Tradition

The process of naming birds and animals is anything but recent, and there are congregated listings of birds and plants in early Assamese literature. The content of most of these works is generally religious, or based on Hindu epics and mythologies, and there is only marginal space and liberty for the author or poet to talk about plants and animals. Descriptions of this nature are confined,

circumscribed to small intervals between the textual narratives, and appear only when describing a place or region unto which the story unfolds.

The *Yoginî Tantra* (dated to the 15th Century C.E.)[2] and other texts such as the *Babrubâha Parva* (dated to the 14th Century C.E.) mention the names of various birds found in Assam. Birds are generally classified into two groups: the *Jalacara* or aquatic birds and *Sthalacara* or terrestrial birds,[3] but there is no further elaboration upon this broad classification. Likewise, names of several fish may be found in the *Matsya Purâna*, a manuscript dealing with the origin and other aspects of fishes. Passing references in these works indicate that there was acute observation of the natural world, but none of these works may be deemed taxonomical, for taxonomy is the practice of classifying organisms according to similarities of structure and origin, of *presumed* natural relationships. Taxonomy views the world as though order exists, and it is the duty of man to reveal it.

The only system of nomenclature that approaches taxonomy, are the criteria for describing various types of elephants. The *Gajçndra-Cintâmani* (1713 C.E.) and more importantly the later *Hastividyârnava* (1734 C.E.) discuss at length the morphologies of different elephants and groups them into distinguishable types. Furthermore, it discusses the temperament and behaviour of different elephants based on the colour of their tusks, nature of their eyes and structure of the body, in other words, on the basis of their external features. This practice of attributing character based on physical form, so common in establishing human power relationships, is now extended to the animal world, to the body of the animal. If we are to ask why nomenclature approaches taxonomy in this case, and not in others, we can only presume that this is because the society very closely identifies with the elephant, not only for its use but also culturally, and that the system in the *Hastividyârnava* is based on a precedent tradition.[4] However, it is worthy to note that the ability to categorize and distinguish the types of elephants in such detail is lacking today.

As no such manuscript dealing with plants, birds or any other animals exist, it is very difficult to be certain whether a parallel system of nomenclature for these groups existed. The various birds mentioned in texts such as the *Babrubâha Parva* are not necessarily grouped according to a taxonomic system stressing relationships, but according to poetic metre that is in congruence with the narrative,[5] or in other cases such as the listing of plants in the *Kâlikâ Purâna*, according to alphabetic order.

This tradition of describing various types of birds by an oral narrative continues to date in various cultural practices, especially with the *Ojâ* performers, a popular form of folk entertainment in Assam where compositions or *hâts* with intricate percussion are played on the drum or *dhol*. Several of these compositions are about the natural world, notable among them being the *hâts* regarding fish and birds. The *Ojâ* performances are an important medium through which folk knowledge and oral traditions are disseminated, and the *Sorai-buloni hât* about birds that is still played today has parts of prose identical to that of the 14th Century *Babrubâha Parva*. This continuity is an example of how a certain system of understanding the natural world, though not taxonomical in nature, is disseminated

and sustained culturally. The cultural practice is integral to the creation of a worldview, and a change in the former is likely to affect the latter.

2 The Categories of Things

The most startling feature that crops up in the realm of folk nomenclature is the discontinuity in naming organisms. By discontinuity one means the extensive local names that exist for certain taxa, and almost none for others: in Assam, the most diverse names exist for plants, followed by fish, birds and animals, while there are no names for the great diversity of butterflies that are so prominent in the host landscape. When compared to western taxonomy, is becomes quite apparent that such folk knowledge is not an all-encompassing apparatus, that it does not rest on the fulcrum of mapping and charting the entire living world. But then why is it discontinuous? Why does the unevenness become so stark, so lucid?

It is revealed that for those groups that have several names, or for which a number of forms are recognized, there runs a parallel diversity of folk beliefs associated with it. The current section discusses these to a certain extent with the view of trying to understand how indigenous cultures construct nature through nomenclature. In a heterogeneous society, like the one that prevails in Assam, the ability to recognize different plants and animals varies to a noticeable degree in different sections of the community. For example the *Kaivartas*, a community that are traditionally fishermen, are able to recognize several species of turtles and have names for each of them. These names are, for the most part, are unknown to other communities that live in the same regions of the Assam valley, albeit with other activities as their means of livelihood. This ability to distinguish the same from the other, to chose between the different and the double, in other words to form some sort of normative criteria in assigning specificity, may be related to how closely a culture or group is associated with those organisms and the environment in which they live.

Fish

Assamese names exist for a large number of fish, and when equated with other groups, it is found that the Assamese are able to determine and distinguish between different types of fish with a great amount of accuracy and precision. The existence of local names for most indigenous species indicates that the language has brought together a whole category of things, from extended and dispersed spaces, and placed them onto a determined and definable grid. Probing into such spaces and giving them an identity, defining them, is an elliptical understanding of the extant and nature of the natural and lived environment.

If we wish to try and understand why the society has been able to build such extensive knowledge regarding fish, it is important to know what fish mean to that culture, the symbolism centered around fish, together with the cultural values and practices that grow out of it. These facets need to be comprehended, for we are not dealing with a culture that catalogues or creates taxonomies, a culture in which there is a predetermined desire to totalize. Thus a search for a metaphysic of folk taxonomy, if such as thing exists at all, must encompass a broader category of cultural phenomena.

In the *Matsya-buloni hât* played by the *Ojâ* musicians, both prawn (*Misâ Mâs* or false fish in Assamese) and Gharial are included amongst fish. Several fish are mentioned in this composition, and here too the arrangement is according to poetic metre and not on behavioural or morphological attributes. There is no indication of interrelations between species, but only of their existence.

Fish is an important source of food for the Assamese, and it is for this reason that it is believed to be an inseparable part of Assamese culture.[6] Unlike in most other parts of India, the *Brâhmins* and *Vaishnavs* of Assam eat fish. The 15th Century *Yoginî Tantra* states that no class in Assam is prevented from eating meat or fish, suggesting that the consumption of fish amongst these classes was prevalent even during medieval times. The cultural link, however, is not restricted to food alone and several myths and beliefs related to fish exist in the state. In the *Arsu Akun* ceremony of the *Mishings*, a tribe living in the Brahmaputra valley, a man has to carry with him a hundred and twenty varieties of fish to the girl's home when he goes to select her as a bride.[7] Although such practice is not widespread today, it is striking to note the number of different types of fish that need to be carried, for this is presupposed by the fact the same number needs to be *recognized, found and caught*. This requires an enormous amount of knowledge of both the types of fish *as well as their environment*.

Fish are regarded as symbols of fertility, and this is probably because of the large number of offspring that they produce. There is a tradition of the offering of a fish to a family when there is a newborn child, for it is believed that this offering will assure productivity of the child in future. Likewise a groom gifts a fish to the bride's home at the time of their wedding. Sometimes such gifts are in the form of live catfish, which are released prior to the marriage so that the couple is blessed with a child and long-life. Furthermore fish are almost always consumed on the eve of *Mâgh Bihu*, an important festival in Assam, and this too is linked to fertility.[8]

In the *Lakhimi Âdorâ Utsav*, an observance that is related to agriculture and practiced amongst a large part of the agrarian populace, fish is linguistically equated to *Lakhimi*, the Hindu goddess of wealth. This metaphorically creates a *notion of value* that is not linear or tangible, but perceptible within the confines of cultural practice by which the metaphor is evoked. This notion of value is valid as long as the cultural process is sustained. The creation of value is an important dimension that enhances the understanding of how nature is constructed by culture, for the moment value is attributed to any facet, the ideas and interests of that culture are always and already imposed upon it.

Between the attribution of value and the imposition of interests on any group in nature, emerges the knowledge base regarding that group. From the symbolism centering on fish, we can say that the cultural value it has in the society, together with its encounter with practices such as fishing that view it as a more tangible resource, has led to the knowledge regarding fish that is extant today. It is interesting to note that some Latin names of fish are derived from local names, common examples of which are *Labeo rohita* from "Rou" and *Notopterus chitala* from "Chital", pointing to the fact that in many cases the development of western taxonomy was the result of a fusion with already existing forms of indigenous knowledge.

Fig 1: The Greater Leptoptilos dubius (a) and Lesser Adjutants Leptoptilos javanicus (b) are two species for which individual names vary greatly and often overlap in the different dialects of the Assamese language. Both birds have a widespread distribution in the Brahmaputra valley and are some of the most distinct birds in the regional landscape.

Birds

Extensive collection of bird names from different parts of Assam has resulted in more ambivalence regarding the identity of species than what was expected. Distinctions and divisions between similar species are very loose, almost seamless and without any boundary. A bird called by a certain name in one part of the state, may be something completely different in another. However, the ability to *distinguish between types* is more or less the same throughout the region, and similar forms are recognized in most parts of the state. Part of this seamlessness is derived from the fact that we are trying to make two different traditions of thought compatible – western taxonomy and folk nomenclature, and they are seldom so.

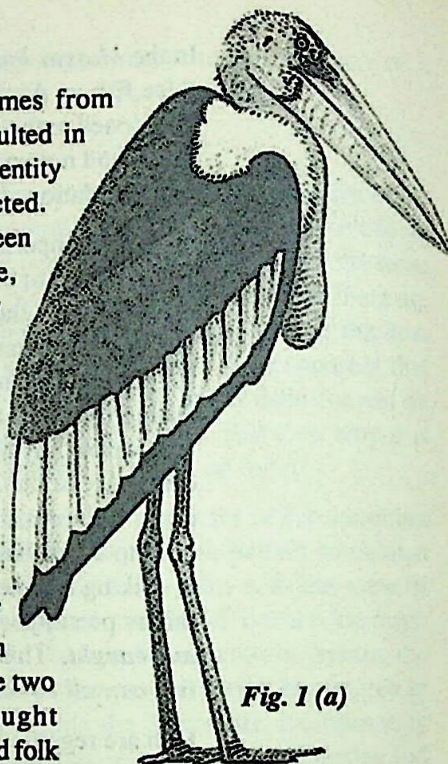


Fig. 1 (a)

In certain instances it has been found that there are several names for the species and the individual names vary greatly in the different dialects of the Assamese language. A typical example of this is the names for the Greater *Leptoptilos dubius* and Lesser Adjutants *Leptoptilos javanicus*.[9] Both have a widespread distribution in the Brahmaputra valley and are some of the most distinct birds in the regional landscape.

The converse is also true in many cases: the same name is ascribed to a wide number of species, sometimes coming up with results that are greatly different from the concept of a species that proponents of Linnaean taxonomy are used to. It is here that I would like to discuss what I call 'the problem of *Jamdâkini*'.

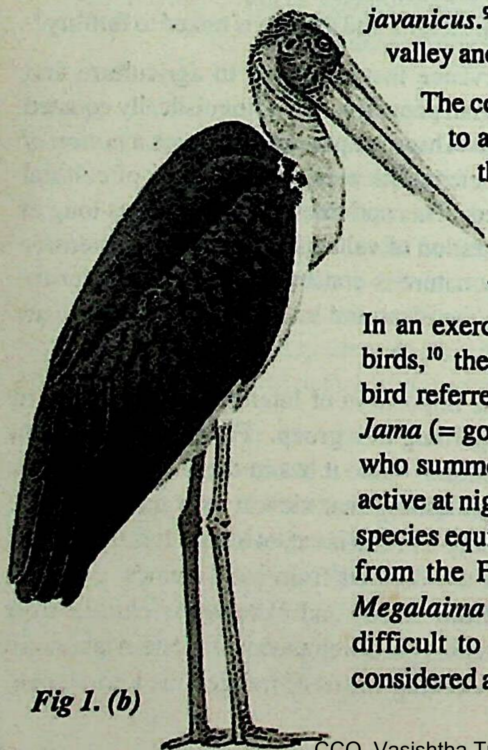


Fig 1. (b)

In an exercise undertaken to try and standardize Assamese names of birds,[10] there was a lot of debate regarding the species equivalent of a bird referred to as *Jamdâkini*. This compound word is derived from *Jama* (= god of death) and *dâk* (= to call), and literally means the 'one who summons the lord of death'. The name points to any bird that is active at night and has an eerie call. Investigations in trying to ascribe a species equivalent in the sense modern taxonomists understand it, range from the Forest Eagle-Owl *Bubo nipalensis* to the Great Barbet *Megalaima virens*.[11] The call itself is not specifically defined, making it difficult to identify the species on the basis of its vocalization. It is considered a bad omen if the bird calls in the neighbourhood, and similar

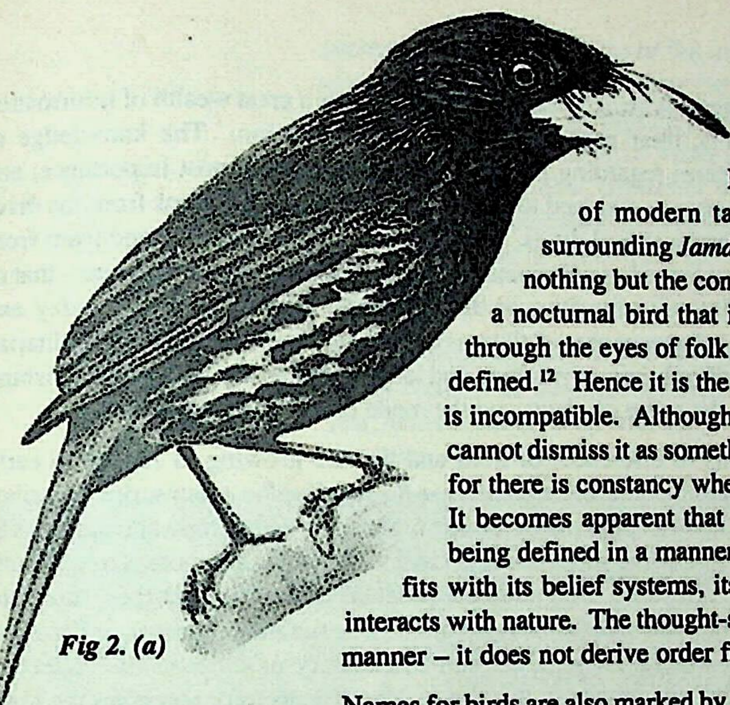


Fig 2. (a)

associations with misfortune have been made with nocturnal birds in many parts of the world.

If we view this from the perspective of modern taxonomy, then the nomenclature surrounding *Jamdâkini* and its species equivalents are nothing but the construction of a concept, a concept of a nocturnal bird that is an evil omen. However, if seen through the eyes of folk knowledge, then a species is being defined.[12] Hence it is the notion of what a species is, is what is incompatible. Although the term *Jamdâkini* is multiple, we cannot dismiss it as something vague and not circumscribable, for there is constancy when it comes to the nature of the call. It becomes apparent that the species or the notion of one is being defined in a manner the society wants to, in a way that fits with its belief systems, its worldview, but also in the way it interacts with nature. The thought-system orders the world in a definite manner – it does not derive order from the world.

Names for birds are also marked by large absences, semiotic gaps where a great number of forms lack signifiers reducing them to almost some sort of nullity. This is one of the most significant aspects of folk nomenclature, or any other thought-system for that matter: what is outside the realm of language is unknowable. In the case of Passerines, names or collective terms are virtually non-existent for a wide range of species, especially for smaller birds such as babblers, warblers and flycatchers. Few of the names that do exist are only for those species that are found in and around crop-fields, whereas forest birds are completely absent.

This disparity in the ability to identify different groups or taxa is apparent, and the question why the culture is able to recognize so many varieties of fish with such a degree of accuracy and not birds, would arise in the minds of many. It is beyond the scope of a preliminary essay like this to be able to answer this question, but the answer lies partly in the question of resource use. This certainly is an important dimension in nomenclature, for it is more likely that an elaborate nomenclature will arise when groups that are viewed as resources, leading the culture to be more particular in that context. A culture will perhaps need to be more specific in naming and identifying objects to which it assigns some sort of value, than of those to which it does not.

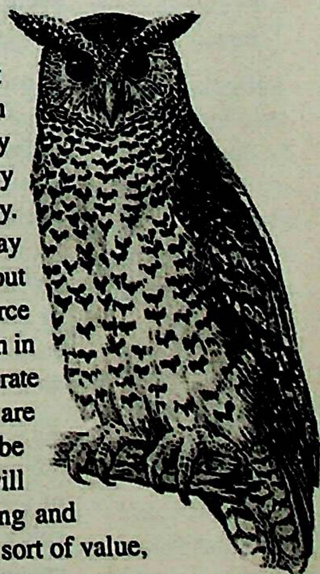


Fig 2. (b)

Fig 2: The name Jamdakini is ascribed to several birds with an eerie call, ranging from the Great Barbet Megalaima virens (a) to the Forest Eagle-Owl Bubo nipalensis (b)

Plants

Through the ages, the society has been able to amass a great wealth of information regarding plants, their uses and methods of cultivation. The knowledge of indigenous cultures regarding plants is viewed to be of utmost importance, and part of the importance assigned to such forms of knowledge stems from the drive to find new pharmaceutical drugs. The consciousness to preserve and learn from indigenous knowledge has culminated in the creation of a new discipline – that of ethnobotany. Extensive literature on the folk medicine of Assam exists today, and information on indigenous uses of plants is gathered not only from its direct utilitarian value, but also the religion, mythology and language of a culture, thus establishing a link between the value of plants and the mode of living of the society.

There are extensive references of trees and flowers growing in Assam in early Assamese literature. The illustrated *Lava-Kuœar Yuddha* manuscript describes several trees and plants growing in Assam, together with the tropical conditions in which they grow.[13] More recent authors categorize such references into (i) plants grown for food (ii) those used as forest products or timber (iii) those used for medicinal purpose and (iv) flowering plants. This functional grouping based on their use, is an attempt assign some sort of category or order to the collective ensemble, and it is not necessary that the society adheres to or perceives the plant world as being constituted by such categories. Nature being perceived as a collection of attributes that man is able to use is ingrained in the very idea of *value*, an idea that seems to be essential to the ontology of folk nomenclature.

The growth of botany to its present state as a biological science has been directly linked to the uses of plants, and many of the early botanical gardens actually arose from physic gardens, and quite often the same professor taught both medicine and botany.[14] Thus in folk nomenclature, unlike in western botanical science, there was never the *transition* from a knowledge system *based on use* to one that is all encompassing and *creates categorizes*.

Most trees that bear a large number of fruit, produce a large number of seedlings, or in other words a high reproductive capacity, are also assigned value in folk or religious institutions. This is made manifest by non-utilitarian values that are associated with certain plants, such as the Plantain, which is used in a range of social and cultural functions. The varied use ranges from the building of entry arches to venues that have social or religious significance, to the making of pedestals on which religious texts are placed, as well as to make utensils for social functions or ceremonies. In other cases, as exemplified by the use of Mango (*Mangifera indica*) leaves in marriage or some religious function, value takes on a form that is akin to some form of plant-worship.[15]

As witnessed in the discussions on the other taxa, we find that closely related to the construct of value is the concept of resource, a concept that is like a shadow of the former, unable to exist without its object. Although a consequence of value, it is important to note that resource itself is a neutral word that carries unstated values with it.[16] It is always worth asking whether what is called a resource has some other, non-commercial value associated with it, be it cultural or religious. But the manner in which science has been received in a post-colonial

country such as India, a lot of the acceptance and the establishment of scientific thought rests on a lever that declares these social and religious practices as steeped in superstition, thus making many cultural and religious notions of resource value obsolete. Rather, these values get subsumed by a global capitalist ethic. Thus, when we talk about conservation as a science it must be kept in mind that it does not completely efface the manner in which a society culturally copes with the ecosystem.

Snakes

The nomenclature and beliefs that surrounds snakes is heavily clouded by an element of the fantastic, and seems to emerge from an ethos of fear, hence making lucid, unbiased statements almost impossible. Almost all snakes are considered to be venomous, barring the Checkered Keelback *Xenochrophis piscator*,[17] and this too has perhaps made actual observations of their habits impossible, leading to a substitution of the actual by the mythological. A common belief is that snakes inhabit water, granaries and places where money is kept,[18] and certain snakes, especially the Cobra, are believed to be the guardians of granaries where rice grain is stored in the homes of people. They are viewed to be *Jala-Devatâ* or Water-god, as indicated by the sculpture of a snake in the middle of ponds or lakes was prevalent in parts of Assam.[19]

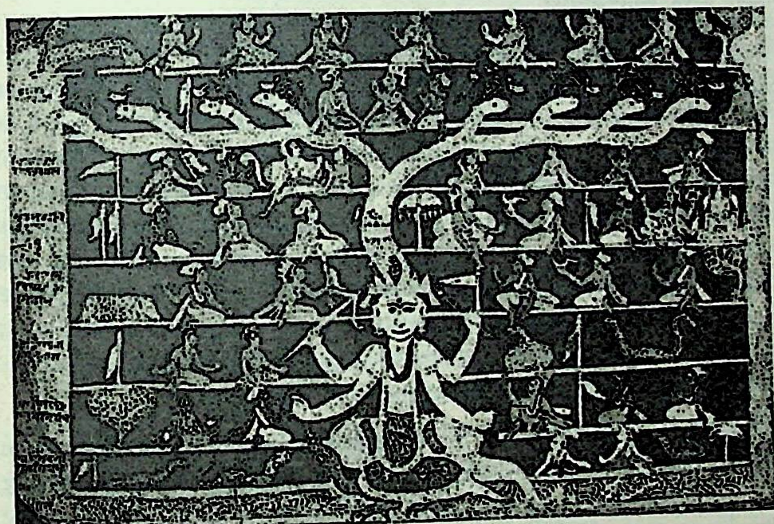


Fig 3: Pictorial depiction of Anantanag or the great serpent is shown in the Anadi-Patan manuscript of the Satriya School of painting. Earth-quakes are believed to be caused by the movement of the snake holding the world.

As snake-bite can be fatal in certain instances, the killing of snakes is a common reaction amongst most people when they see one. There however is a lot of ambivalence in belief regarding their killing. The husbands of pregnant women are not allowed to kill snakes, for it is believed that the child born to the couple will have a tongue that moves in a manner reminiscent of one. This associates the consequence of killing snakes to some sort of curse, to some sort of taboo. On the other hand, individuals bitten by snakes are not cremated, but buried instead.

The sight of a snake may either be auspicious or inauspicious. A pair of mating snakes is considered to be auspicious in relation to fights or quarrels, and sometimes a cloth is thrown near the mating pair with the hope that the cloth is rubbed by the snakes, for it then is supposed to become a very powerful object to be worn during times of war.[20] There are several references to a jewel that is supposed to be present in the head of a snake, and many folk stories about efforts to obtain this jewel. Assam was supposed to be a land of black magic and witchcraft, and snakes

feature quite often in manuscripts of dealing with this subject. The shed skin and the venom of snakes are ingredients of traditional medicines, some used for the purpose of charming women.

According to *Kathâ Guru Charita*, a biography, or more appropriately a hagiography of the Vaishnav Saint Sankaradevâ, the saint was given shade by a Cobra and hence for the Vaishnavs (who form a large part of the local populace) killing Cobras is taboo. Snakes living in and around *Nâmghars* or community prayer halls in villages are believed to be auspicious.

Earthquakes are believed to be caused by the movement of the snake holding the world, and the pictorial depiction of *Anantanâg* or the great serpent is shown in the *Anâdi-Pâtan* manuscript of the Satriya School of painting.[21]

3 Resource Use and Taxonomy

An important division needs to be made between nomenclature and taxonomy: whilst the former is a system of words and involves the process of naming, or more accurately signifying, the latter is a method of classifying such objects or organisms according to their presumed natural relationships. A society may have nomenclatures, but such knowledge is not necessarily organized according to natural relationships. In preceding the discussions on the naming of various groups or taxa, we find that the name-systems are at best nomenclatures, and not taxonomies. This divide between the two is not an attempt to qualitatively segregate one from the other or to make one stand above the other as a superior organization of knowledge. Rather, this distinction is necessary in order to compare two thought-systems, two different worldviews or perceptions of nature.

A folk nomenclature tends to stress on the experiential aspect of the ecosystem and its constituents. Taxonomy on the other hand is a categorical, all-encompassing system that has the innate tendency to expand, to fill into the pores of the natural world and bring it under the domain of human knowledge. It is a discipline that has taken its present form after European imperialism and expansion, and has the capability to describe newer forms, to assimilate the unknown. Such capability is perhaps lacking in nomenclature, where the unknown is not readily brought into the fold of the known and is limited by being linguistically unable to describe what is outside its circumference. But elaborate nomenclatures have a functional purpose for any culture situated in a particular ecological context, and do not isolate species or view them in a fragmented, detached manner.

Another striking feature that becomes apparent is that folk nomenclatures of the natural world, like any other system of categories, are steeped in value. Even modern taxonomy, that originated partly from evdeavours to catalogue and organize nature so as to be able to find new resources for use, still elliptically seeks to assign some form of value to species that are newly described, or to those that do not have any perceptible utilitarian function. Such notions of value are in the form of conservation for posterity or the conservation of the gene-pool. It is a different debate whether species that do not have any utilitarian value need to be conserved, and it is not my intention to follow that line of argument. This is only to point out how the function of assigning value arises in any taxonomical system.

The coming about of such nomenclature is intrinsically linked to the manner in which the society organizes itself and the use of such a system simultaneously furthers the interests of that society, it's the mode of production and system of values. In Assamese there is a phrase *Madârar Phul*, "the flower of the Indian Coral Tree *Erythrina indica*", that refers to someone who is useless, or one who is an underdog. The term is used because these flowers look good but are of no use in any religious or social institutions, and hence considered worthless. This exemplifies the fact that no clear-cut distinction can be made between the *use* of a system of words and the *furthering of interests and values* that their use involves as a necessary condition of consequence.

It is perhaps taken for granted by most biologists that the natural world as made manifest by systematics is the "true" world, and all folk or traditional knowledge is a partial and incomplete understanding of that totality. Such approaches, however, are not neutral and neither are they value-free, for they too are steeped in a certain vision of the world, a certain schema of things. It also is reflective of the limitation of our own thinking, our inability to perceive the natural world in another way. ❑

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[2] There is certain controversy as to the date of the Yoginî Tantra. An insight into this issue may be obtained from Sharma, M.M. (1994) Sanskrit Literature Pp 261-271 in Barpujari, H.K. (ed.) The Comprehensive History of Assam. Vol. III. Guwahati: Publication Board, Assam

[3] Barua, B.K. (1986) A Cultural History of Assam (Early Period). Volume 1. 3rd Edition. Guwahati: Bina Library

[4] The elephant culture of Assam arose at least 1500 years ago, and occupies a significant place in Assamese history and culture. For a fuller account of this, see Barua, M. (2005) The Elephant in Assamese History and Mythology. Kaziranga Centenary Celebration Volume Pp 34-39

[5] Hamsa pâra kâka baka âru pheca paksî
Kairâ mairâ kukurâ cataka âche lekhi
Sâranga kupatî bherâ kuruvâ devamarâ
Pânîkâka raghugurâ mâchrokâ kanovâ
Bhadrakâli kovâ konda dâuka titrî
Gupechî sâîikî tuni kanovâmuchurî
Deva carâi dharâ carâi saguna tokorâ
Bajradamda pundarîka gobara-khocharâ
Gangâcilâ phâkuchilâ bhârei kapilâ
Koroòca kuruvâ pencâ pheculukâ chilâ
- *Babrubâha Parva* V. 30-32

[6] Barua, B.K. (1961) *Axomor Loka Samskriti*. (in Assamese) Guwahati: Bina Library

[7] Barua, B.K. ibid.

[8] Gogoi, L. (1994) *Axomor Sanskriti.* (in Assamese) Guwahati: Banalata

[9] The names *Bortukulâ, Bortoklâ, Hârgilâ, Dhodong, Hodong, Kanuwâ, Bor Kanuwâ* are used for both these two species, often interchangeably. There has been a lot of debate in academic circles regarding the assignation of specific names to the two species, but it is important to realize that their use by the general public is far from being clearly defined. There however remains the ability to distinguish between the two as separate species.

[10] WANT: ibid.

[11] Barua, M. (1998) Some reflections regarding the nomenclature of Assamese bird names. *Unpublished.*

[12] Terms for species, or concepts that would define the notion of a species include *Jâti, Prajâti, Bîdh.*

[13] Choudhury, R.D. and Kalita, N. (2001) *Manuscript Paintings from Kâmarûpa Anusandhâna Samhiti.* Guwahati: Kâmarûpa Anusandhâna Samhiti

[14] Pyenson, L. and Sheets-Pyenson, S. (1999) *Servants of Nature: the Fontana history of scientific institutions, enterprises and sensibilities.* London: Fontana Press

[15] see Gogoi, L. ibid. and Barua, BK (1966) *Bihugitot Axamiya Jivanar Chitra* Pp 338-353 in Neog, H.P. and Gogoi, L. ed. *Asamiya Sanskriti* (in Assamese) Guwahati: Assam Sahitya Sabha

[16] Schultz, B. (2001) *Language and Environmental Problems* Pp 109-114 in Fill, A. and Mulhausler, P. (ed.) *The Ecolinguistics Reader* New York: Continuum

[17] According to folk belief, the Checkered Keelback *Xenochrophis piscator* or *Dhorâ Úâp* as it is called in Assamese, was a poisonous snake that had temporarily hid its venom in a secluded place in the water. The Xingi Fish found the poison and took a part of it. Hence, today both the Xingi Fish and Checkered Keelback have venom, but in very small and non-fatal quantities.

[18] Barua, B.K. ibid.

[19] Barua, B.K. ibid.

[20] Barua, B.K. ibid.

[21] Choudhury, R.D. and Nandagopal, C. (1998) *Manuscript Paintings of the Assam State Museum (A Catalogue).* Guwahati: Directorate of Museums, Assam.

Moushumi Kandali

the 'political' in religious: the sculptural reliefs in srihati sattra

colonial impression on vaishnvite art form of assam

Art mediates, maps, reflects, records its time-space - sometimes with bold letters, at times with indecipherable scribbles that calls for decoding. Art has been playing this role, even within tethered restrictions and bindings. For instance, religious art which acts as one of the medium for propagating the canonical truths and mythical narratives of certain religion through symbolic depictions or realistic illustrations, also at times sparks off a glimmer of political reflexivity in the guise of spiritual. The Srihati Sattra of Assam, which is an important site of Vaishnavite art form can come across as an amazing example of this. During a visit to this monastery in 2000, I was gripped by some of the wooden sculptural reliefs on the wall of this sattra that seemed to whisper in the tune of the mythological something political. In a humble attempt to listen and capture that whisper that I have tried herein, we shall proceed by delving into the background and origin of the art form and mapping its evolution at first.



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THE BACKGROUND AND ORIGIN :

The Neo-Vaishnavite Bhakti movement of medieval India was a religio-cultural upheaval of an unprecedented manner, paving space for a repertoire of multiple art forms like manuscript painting, fresco, sculpture / sculptural relief, wood carving, dance-drama-music-recitals and other minor art forms which acted as an illustrative media for the religious / philosophical / literary expressions of this movement. In Assam Srimanta Shankaradeva (1449–1568 AD) the Bhakti saint-artist-poet-social reformer who propounded the Vaishnavite movement established the first *Sattra* – the medieval monastery, a forerunner of about two hundred and fifty-six as on date. Sattras are wonder houses that nurture and unfold a vast spectacle of cloistered art forms such as *Borgeet* (Raga based Bhakti music), *Sattriya Nritya* (Classical Dance Form), *Bhaona* (Theatre-Performance), Manuscript Painting, Sculpture, Wood carving / Sculptural reliefs (on the walls of *Sattra* structures) and other associated art forms such as mask making, costume designing, and production of artifacts like the votive wooden structures (*Asana, Sim'hasana*), *Thogi* (book rests), decorated pleasure boats (*Khel-Nao*), *Dola* (Litter), etc.. Some *Sattra*-associated ritual enactments such as the erection of *Akash Banti* (massive sky lanterns made of bamboo) in Kamalabari *Sattra* of Majuli would remind one to the contemporary art of installations.

Manuscript painting is the major narrative form of visual art of Vaishnavite traditions that grew under the *Sattra* patronage (named as *Sattriya* School by Sri Rajatananda Das Gupta). This school comprising of the refined and sophisticated works such

as the *CHITRA BHAGAVATA* (tentatively dated 1539 AD), *GEETA GOVINDA* (Assamese translation datable from late 17th to early 18th century) and others bear a distinct stylistic idiom. It is characterized by an admixture of classical / elitist and folk-tribal elements – a fusion of specific indigenous locale and broader pan-Indian features. Scholars have discerned elements of indigenous folk-tribal traditions such as Tai-Buddhist manuscripts of the *Monpas*, *Sherdukpens* (Tribes of Arunachal), Bhutiyas and others. Though manuscript paintings sprang up as the major narrative tradition in Vaishnavite culture, the wood carvings / sculptural relief (occasionally done on mud plastered surfaces) used in Sattra architecture forms an equally significant visual tradition. The significance of this genre of art lies in the fact that unlike manuscript painting which gradually dwindled at the advent of colonialism, wood carving / sculptural relief continued as a living tradition till date. This is a visual tradition which has mediated it's immediate spatio-temporal changes and has been adaptive / reflexive of the socio-political-economic-cultural environments. It has been enduring itself by an ongoing process of appropriation / re-appropriations, both in the stylistic and technical levels. This is evident in uses of new medium / material / executional methods & techniques / composition / treatment of space-time / typology of figurations / architectural settings / costumes and apparel and other such pictorial or formal elements. The observed deviation from conformity with the standardized canons of visual narratives is probably due to exposure and encounter with other parallel art forms, along with the spatio-temporal changes. There is a possibility that this genre of art can be seen as a link phase between the traditional mode of visual narrative to the modern westernized mode of narration which emerged in Assam during the third decade of twentieth century. Of course this is not to claim that modernism (in Assam) is a natural descendant of this phase; but is rather a refabrication / reconstruction of western idioms and ideologies in the Indian context. Whenever the phasing out of the rich and vibrant tradition of manuscript paintings by the modern art of western orientation is examined, one often tends to disregard the living tradition of wood carving / sculptural relief which has continued to exist parellely right from the origin of Vaishnavite visual art to contemporary times (and art). Sustaining on an endeavor of assimilations of traditional manuscript painting and indigenous folk traditions with the new forms of European academic realism and popular art forms like the calendar art, bazaar paintings, modern iconography of idol making, etc. has given it a distinct narrative form which at times unfolds a mosaic of multiple intersection and juxtaposition of the sacred / secular; classical / folk and the traditional / contemporary.

Although manuscript painting has drawn the attention of scores of scholars, the art of woodcarving and sculptural relief has not been examined in depth except by a few scholars such as Jugal Das, Nilomoni Phukan and Dr. Birendranath Dutta, etc. A seminal observation is made by Dr. Birendranath Dutta in Chapter III of his book FOLK PAINTING IN ASSAM (Tezpur University Publications, 1998). In his formulation, this genre is clubbed with other related art forms in what he has named the *KHANIKAR Style*; after the versatile traditional artists / artisans who displayed expertise in all forms of art- painting, wood carving, idol making, mask making, costume designing, stage setting and drop scene painting, props making, theatrical make up and artifacts of religious and everyday use. A class (not a caste) *Khanikars* received enduring patronage both from the Sattras and the Royal Court of Ahoms before colonial rule and perhaps formed a kind of guild. However,

in this context the term *'khanikar* style' appears to carry an element of ambiguity as the illustrators of manuscripts were also known as *khanikars*. In fact, whoever would sculpt, paint, model and fashion artifacts are known as *khanikar* in Assam. It may be that the author wanted to emphasise the point that whereas in several cases, the illustrator-painter cum calligrapher of the manuscript paintings have been traced to their individual identities (Like the Ghanashyam Kharghoria Phukan, Sri Sashadhar Aata of *PARIJAT HARAN* fame or Sri Durga Panchanan or Durgadas Dwij of *KARNA PARBA* and others), the artists or *Khanikars* of woodcarving / paintings of the *Sattra* architecture are all anonymous without decipherable names. Hence all the art forms done by the anonymous *Khanikars* are clubbed together to give a common name after the artists may be seen as a tribute to them. Or perhaps the author wants to emphasise the fact that one of the art forms is abandoned while the other is still a living tradition. It must be pointed out that the wall paintings and sculptural reliefs were more integral part of common life as they were accessible to the common masses unlike the illustrated manuscripts which were exclusive in nature, kept in the secluded sacred interior of *Sattra* premises to be accessed only by a selected few like the *Sattra* dignitaries and privileged literati. Wood carvings and sculptural reliefs painted on the walls had a definite functional objective to serve. Apart from being used as decorative embellishments of the Sattra architecture, they played role similar to the fresco paintings of medieval European church of being the vehicle to spread the gospel amongst the masses. Thus this art form came up as a visual medium within the distinct indigenous traditions to become an integral part of folk-life. In general, the manuscripts seem to be more refined and sophisticated with free flowing delineations, and exhibit finer handling of other pictorial elements as compared to the wood carvings and sculptural reliefs. However, this can be attributed to the fact that the smaller medium of manuscript painting has inherent advantages in these aspects. This is also the reason why the carved and painted panels are mostly simple, direct, and comprehensible which enacts a crucial moment of a narration rather than the entire sequence of events. The task becomes more challenging as one has to execute the narration within the limited space available conforming to the pre-determined architectural set up. (The most imaginative and appealing capability of these artists is evident in the technique of utilizing the negative spaces of the pictorial design to carve out decorative windows which serve the dual purpose of admitting light and air besides enhancing the aesthetics of the structure / design.) Therefore, taking the foregoing into account, the art of wood carving / sculptural relief may be considered as an extended form of manuscript painting in spite of the visible mediumistic / technical differences between the two. It may be stated that manuscript painting predates decorative wood carvings / sculptural reliefs since it is logical to execute a concept on a smaller scale and subsequently scale it up in size.

THE EVOLUTION – A HISTORY OF APPROPRIATION AND ASSIMILATION :

The two related art forms thrived side by side till the early nineteenth century. However, after the decline of the Ahom Kingdom and advent of colonialism, the genre of manuscript painting lost its patronage and gradually faded out. Wood carvings and sculptural reliefs on the other hand continued to thrive as a vehicle of popularising traditional Vaishnavite sermons. Reaching the masses was all the more important after the coming of the Baptist missionaries who tried to woo the masses from the grasp of pagan deities with missionary zeal. The *Sattras* were competing with the missionaries to retain their disciples whose relations with the *Sattras*

were not only spiritual but also material since it was they who provided the tributes that a *Sattra* needed to survive. Communications and inter-regional interactions underwent a quantum change after the advent of the British. With the coming of railways it became possible for even a relatively less wealthy person to visit other parts of the country especially for religious, educational and commercial purposes. Cheap rail travel made it possible for an *Adhikar* of even a minor *Sattra* to visit Calcutta with his entourage for *GANGA SNAN*. In lower Assam, it was quite common for a Brahmin to have several disciples amongst the landed gentry of East Bengal and Cooch Bihar. They would undertake an annual visit to these disciples for carrying out puja and also to collect tributes. Brahmins were also engaged as priests in Sattras especially those belonging to the *Brahma Sanghati* where idol worship was practised. Thus the people, both social elite and commoners had encountered the sweeping changes both in the realm of life and art either first or second hand. In a broader context, Victorian illusioniststic art, naturalism / academic realism and the notion of artistic progress took root in India around this time and new genres such as oil paintings were introduced. The artist began to lose his previous faceless character and gained a new status as an individual 'gentleman artist'. The first of the gentlemen artists Raja Ravi Varma whose particular adaptations of western techniques – using European perspective and figure-modeling with Hindu and nationalist imagery – evolved into India's ubiquitous, gaudy, glossy painted pictures of gods and goddesses, called 'calendar-art'. His oleograph prints were spread all over the country, thanks to the advent of printing presses (an examples of which reached even the remote town of Margherita in the eastern corner of India). Calendar art began to play a major role in the lives of average Indians as objects of devotion, advertising agents in the form of business giveaways and as an affordable decorative essential. Besides portraying the mundane concepts of love, romance, devotion, etc., they continue as reflections of significant temporal events, ideas and personalities from the rise of nationalism to the Kargil War. The emergence of bazaar paintings was another significant phenomenon of the Raj. 'Patuas' migrating from rural Bengal to Calcutta to set up their practice around the Kalighat temple created a new school of art where from mythological depiction to the impressions of dynamic social environment of urban Calcutta and its Babu culture were recorded. Being mass produced and affordable, these were prized by the low and middle-income groups as objects d' art. All these along with the media of theatre and newly introduced bioscopes contributed to the growth of a popular culture whose form continues to be transformed over time till today. No wonder that these changes would have repercussion in the living art traditions. Thus the changing socio-political and cultural arena brought about by the colonialism also began to get reflected even in the *Sattra* related art 'praxis' especially the living art form of decorative sculptural relief, registering a deviation from the standardized canons of visual narrative. New assimilations / departures further heightened its hybrid folk-classical-popular character. The foremost change was in the material-wood and mud plasters at places replaced by cement as concrete buildings began to replace thatched construction and synthetic dyes taking the place of *hengul* and *haital*. The sculptural relief on the walls of the Srihati *Sattra* of Suwalkuchi is a witness to these changes which we propose to discuss herein.

THE 'POLITICAL' IN RELIGIOUS : THE SCULPTURAL RELIEFS IN SRIHATI SATTRA:

There is no definite date as to when Srihati an *udasin Sattra* of Suwalkuchi, was

established. According to the *Burha Sattradhikar* Sri Madhav Chandra Mahanta, Kanu Burha Thakur who is believed to be a relative of Sri Sri Madhav Dev established the *Sattra* where Sri Ram Nidhi Prabhu was the first *Sattradhikar*. There have been eleven *Sattradhikars* till date, some of them are Sri Nakul Atoi, Gokul Atoi, Manmath Atoi, Harijay Mahanta, Baakasiddha Purush Bood Ram Mahanta, etc. The *Sattradhikar, bhakats* and nearby residents claim that the *Sattra* is about 400–450 years old whereas the *Deka Sattradhikar* Sri Dipak Ch. Mahanta opines that the *Sattra* is 250–300 hundred years old. The later claim however appears more plausible. Sattra structure of the Srihati *Sattra* is adorned by wood carvings and paintings on all sides except the rear side of the *Manikut*. The right wall (as we enter the premises) is adorned by a panel of wall paintings on the uppermost portions, below which are several curved windows bearing rectangular frames of wood carvings. The lintel below the window is decorated in *latakata* style with *jalikata* panels below. Most of the carved panels are of high relief pattern. The subjects are drawn from Vaishnavite religious texts – Vishnu in his various incarnations, various mythological characters from *Bhagavat Purana* and other religious texts. Artistic playfulness in the form of incorporations of some neutral subjects such as two cavorting monkeys (Is it Bali & Sugriva or just an ordinary pair of Rhesus variety) is an interesting sidelight. The uppermost panel depicts the scenes of *YAMA - YATANA*, the sinners being punished in the city of Yama, which is reminiscent of the Barpeta *Kirtan Ghar*. Though scholars have doubt whether the Yama Patika tradition prevalent in ancient and medieval India really existed in Assam, it is interesting to see some of the *Sattras*, mostly from the lower Assam part depicting the scenes of *Yama Puri*. Perhaps the most refined and highly aesthetical rendering of the iconographies depicted with high craftsmanship, artistic sensibility and skill are to be found in the two doors – one being the main door and the other being on the left wall. Metallic plates are stuck over the wooden plank of the doors with compartmentalized multiple niches within each an icon is placed. Nilomoni Phukan in his book *LOKA KALPA DRISHTI* has commended the artistic excellence of some of them. According to the *Burha Sattradhikar*, the doors are made in the style of those in Old Kamalabari *Sattra* and Titabor Sattra and were part of the old *Sattra* architecture, which was demolished in the earthquake of 1897. The right side panel of the sculptural relief conforms to the style of *Sattriya* manuscript painting – from the standardized figurations to the placement of icons in the niches, which is a distinctive style of manuscript painting having resemblance to the Buddhist Pala manuscripts. (It is worth mentioning that this feature is evident in numerous decorative relief panels in the various temple architecture of Ahom period.) Few figures in the panels of the right side wall clearly follow a typical *ODA BHANGI* or the stance of standing with feet apart and bent a little at the knees during a *Sattriya* dance recital, which is a distinct feature of *Sattriya* manuscript painting. The costumes and apparel, the floral patterns and the rich palette fairly conform to the manuscript painting. But as we move to the left side panels, we come across a shift in the narrative style. This is where our main concern lies and the focus will primarily rest on the visuals of this left side wall.


a door of the sattra

According to the *Burha Sattradhikar*, who is in the mid fifties, these panels were in existence since his birth. The paints used in the panels appear bright and gaudy and appear to be of commercial origin and definitely not *hengul-haital* of yore. The primary colours are mostly used in

contesting juxtaposition. The empty and uncluttered backgrounds of most frames are painted monochromatic like the manuscript paintings but are azure coloured. The themes of the narratives are mostly centered on KRISHNA LEELA and one or two from the *Ramayana*. The panel is divided into various rectangular compartments / niches adorned by connecting *TORANA*s and each depicts an abbreviated narration of an incident in its crucial moment. Like the Kalighat paintings, here also the sequential narration is abandoned to give place for the abbreviated expression. Now let us review some of the salient picture frames of various panels in detail. To start with, in plate 1 Kamsa is shown sitting on a *Simhasan* to the left wearing waistcoat, trousers and shoes. The guard standing nearby is also similarly attired whose headgear looks like the *PUGREE* of a police constable. In the back ground Vasudeva spirits away infant Krishna. The next frame shows Kamsa about to smash Yoga Maya while two guards witness the scene. One of the guards shown standing on top of the prison points to the deficient sense of proportion on the part of the artist. Kamsa is now on a more traditional attire – bare foot and Dhoti, while the guard on top is attired in western clothes. The way the guards are carrying clubs is also more akin to the posture of a European trained soldier shouldering arms rather than the strong men of Hindu mythology carrying war maces. The apparel in both the frames is clear deviation from tradition and show the influence of colonial times. Of course conformity to the traditional style of composition is maintained. In Assamese tradition of manuscript painting, within the same picture plane several simultaneous events are depicted. A certain pictorial strategy is applied to create a connecting link among the different spaces within one picture frame. At times the figures are placed either in convergence or divergence to distinguish between two different events. The narrative placed within a niche under an arch or *TORANA* is a distinct feature of manuscript painting where the connecting link composition is manifested. In the connecting link composition, a common object connects the different spaces, and the space division is done either by *TORANA* or pillars, trees, etc. These features have been conformed to in most of the narrative frames. In the middle frame of Plate 2, Krishna and Balram are shown walking along the streets of Mathura followed by two of the townsfolk. One is wearing a Gandhi Cap and both wears Jawahar coats over dhotis. The man wearing the Gandhi cap resembles the image of a Satyagrahi seen in the popular art and theatre of those times. Though such kind of topi or cap were pretty common in the western part of India, it was not much seen in the North Eastern part until the advent of 20th Century, when the Freedom Movement spread like wildfire to all parts of India. A rare spectacle is seen on the background where two of the three women are shown baring their breasts something not visible elsewhere in this genre – perhaps a faint echo of the images of fallen women in bazaar paintings and calendar art. The right frame of the third plate also shows a guard clad in trousers and boots in a soldierly posture. In the right frame of Plate 4, the guards are again attired in European style, this time

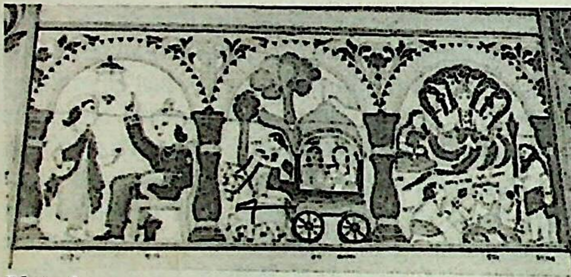


Plate 1

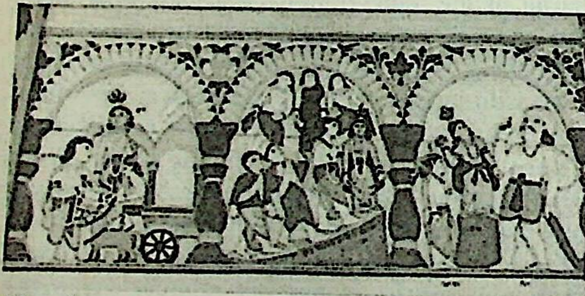


Plate 2



Plate 3

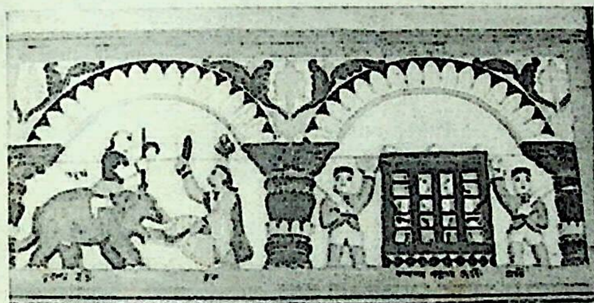


Plate 4



Plate 5

wearing knee boots and red police caps. Even Chanuka (Chanoor?) and Muristhaka (Mustika?) the wrestlers assigned by Kamsa to slay Krishna and Balaram bear striking resemblance to Europeans in facial features as well as dress in plate 5. In the narratives of these panels, Kamsa is often depicted as a monumental iconic figure dwarfing other figures in the frame in order to show his power and position. As we have already seen that there is conformity to certain standardized norms as the connecting link composition, placement of icons within the niche, there are also stark deviations as illustrated above. There are further deviations in the mode of figuration and the gesture / posture of the characters. The conventional figuration in profile with the *ODA BHANGI* posture is now mutated to frontal postures with forward-looking gaze. The typology of figures also has undergone much change into a rounder and plumper shape like that of the popular calendar art figures and the figures of 'modern day' idols such as seen in Durga Puja. It is worth mentioning here that the popular "modern" iconography of the Kumartuli tradition of idol making was popularized in Assam on a mass scale during the mid part of nineteenth century with the influx of Bengali babus who migrated to serve in the state. In the fairs and *haats* associated with various festivals like Raas, scenes of *Krishna Leela* were presented as puppet plays and idols. The similarity of the figuration of *Sattriya* sculptural relief to these popular art forms may be traceable to such cultural developments. Nilamoni Phookan in *LOKA KALPA DRISHTI* mentions a babu smoking hookah in the style of Kalighat painting in another *Sattra* of Suwalkuchi. (Pg.25) The pith - *pat*, *Maju* paintings of Goalpara / Dhubri region, *Bishohari* pats of Gauripur-Golokganj-Bilasipara area shows a clear connectivity to the bazaar painting of Kalighat. Hence their reflection in sculptural relief of Srihati *Sattra* cannot be a far-fetched concept. To carry the study further, European optical perspective and the elements of foreshortening which were not to be seen in traditional renderings are also visible here. A fine example of this is a picture of Sita sitting in the Ashok Vatika with Sarama and Trijatayu (Trijata?). All the four figures are placed in different positions and spaces with a balanced use of space and optical perspective. It is a clear evidence of British Academic realism being appropriated within a local tradition and of stark deviation from the overall earlier look of this art form. Such developments are also evident in the picture frame of Krishna Balaram and Sudama (left part of Plate-3) and the one where Garga Rishi is sitting in the background while Nanda Jasoda and a Dasi are seen discussing (the juxtaposition of some local artifacts and household appliances are noteworthy) in Plate 7. Of course the artist still seems to grapple with the perspectives and proportion of the figures which at times appear crude and comical. A few reflections of change can be seen in minor

detail such as the shape of the asana, which resembles a chair. It is not that there are no references to the European costumes, apparel and persona, etc. in the manuscript painting. In a plate of *BRAHMABAIBARTA PURANA* written in the nineteenth century (British Library Collection) shows four British officers seated on chairs in the court of King Purandar Singha (Kakoli Borkakoty, 'Cihna', P. 70, Silver Jubilee issue, 2001). But whereas the British of *Brahmabaibarta Purana* were an authentic naturalistic representation, depiction of Kamsa and his gang of villains in European apparel seem to be an interesting subversion. The devotees of Mathura in Satygrahi's dress and the oppressors as Europeans are a subtle pointer to the ideological fervor and the socio-political climate of the times. Thus it seems that even costumes and apparel becomes a signifier to the social and economic realities as well as the reflection of current ideological perception.

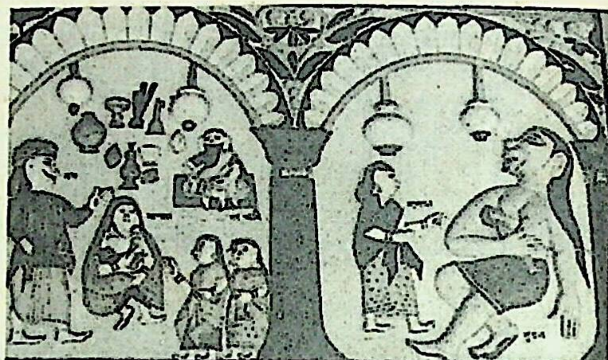


Plate 7

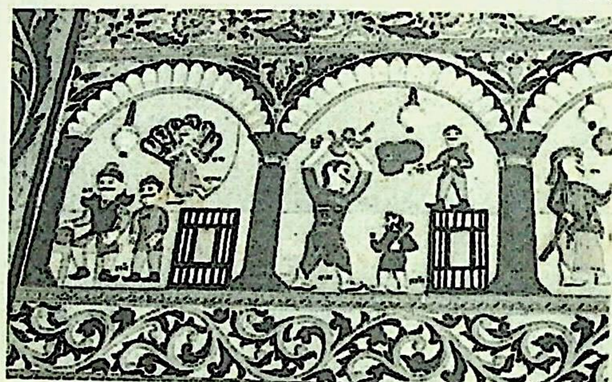


Plate 8

Any study of changing style of a visual tradition involves primarily three factors– the organization of artistic production confined to a specific historical period and it's relation to socio-economic situation, the ideologies which determine them and the formal changes that accrued there from. In our present study of changing style of sculptural relief panels of Srihati *Sattra*, we can infer the socio-economic-cultural changes related to a specific historical time inversely, through the stylistic and formal changes. There is no available means of precisely dating the production but through the stylistic changes, we can assume the time frame and the socio-political environ that gets mediated and reflected therein. In a genre of art form, which is essentially a means of religious representation, it is the circuitous and subtle suggestions through which such things are reflected and one has to unearth the nuances hidden below the surface. Though the *khanikar*s could not afford to be as sharp and direct as the Kalighat and Bazaar painters, they too in their own way have been the recorders of their time. Their roles were different; whereas the bazaar or calendar artists had thematic liberations with a huge market and the advantage of mass production, for the *khanikar*s it was a limited arena, a job of once or twice in a lifetime. Even then despite all adversities, the *khanikar*'s art survived and continues to pulsate. ❑

a window

